THE OUTDOOR GIRLS at the HOSTESS HOUSE

LAURA LEE HOPE

To Lucille
from Florence

Dec. 25, 1928

MOLLY SOUGHT THE HELP OF THE YOUNG SOLDIER.

The Outdoor Girls at the Hostess House *Frontispiece* (*Page* 90)

The Outdoor Girls at the Hostess House

OR

DOING THEIR BEST FOR THE SOLDIERS

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPDALE," "THE MOVING PICTURE GIRLS," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS," "BUNNY BROWN AND HIS SISTER SUE," "SIX LITTLE BUNKERS AT GRANDMA BELL'S," ETC.

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(Five Titles)

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT THE HOSTESS HOUSE

CHAPTER I

HERO WORSHIP

"Oh, Mollie, please be careful!"

The big car skidded perilously around a sharp curve and chug-chugged merrily down the road.

"Goodness, I've been careful so long I'm afraid it will grow on me," Mollie Billette, sometimes known as "Billy," retorted, a determined set to her pretty chin. "Someway, I've got to get it out of my system."

The automobile, a big seven-passenger car, belonged to Mollie, and the four Outdoor Girls, having secured a half-holiday from their work at the Hostess House, were out for recreation.

As may have been gathered, Mollie was driving. Amy Blackwell, fearful of an accident, was in the seat beside her, while Grace Ford and Betty Nelson, their beloved Little Captain, occupied the tonneau and amused themselves by laughing at Amy's fears.

"Well, but you needn't take it out on us," Amy said in reply to Mollie's assertion. "If you're going to take many more of those two-wheel turns, I'm going to get out and walk. Oh, Mol-lie!" The speech ended in a wail, as Mollie wickedly rounded another curve, jolting Amy half out of her seat.

"I don't know but what I agree with Amy," drawled Grace, from the tonneau, helping herself to a chocolate, upon which Betty's eye had just rested longingly. "I've been bumped around so much I can't tell whether I'm a girl or a scrambled egg. Now, look what you did!" A sudden lurch of the big car had sent the box of chocolates to the floor, where its contents rolled about aggravatingly at their feet. "Come back here, Mollie Billette, and pick them up. That's the least——"

The rest of the sentence was never uttered, for Mollie brought the car to so sudden a stop that Grace and Betty both lurched forward and narrowly escaped bumping their noses on the back of the seat in front of them.

"Sure," said the reckless driver, turning her bright black eyes expectantly upon them. "Will you promise to give me all I pick up?"

"All you——" Grace was beginning, striving desperately to recover her breath and her dignity at the same time, the accomplishment of which

feat was decidedly retarded by growing indignation. "Goodness, I never heard such a——"

"Very well," returned Mollie, and, without deigning to parley further, turned determinedly to the wheel. "That's all I wanted to know——"

"Just a minute, Mollie, dearest," Betty's laughing voice broke in. "You know I'm not worrying about the chocolates at all, but I'm not particularly anxious to spoil my perfectly good shoes with crushed chocolate or, on the other hand, bump my perfectly good nose in a vain attempt to pick them——"

"Which, candy or shoes?" Mollie broke in impishly.

"Candy," answered Betty soberly. "As I was saying, neither of these alternatives appeal to me, so, with your kind permission, I would beg you to hold your horses——"

"As the vulgar herd would say," again murmured Mollie.

"Exactly—as the vulgar herd would say," agreed Betty, dimpling adorably, "—until we have a chance to collect the scattered sweets."

"You win," Mollie capitulated, speaking in a tone reserved for the "Little Captain." "Only please make Grace hurry or the afternoon will be over before she begins."

"Goodness, listen to it——" Grace was begin-

ning, straightening indignantly from her stooping posture and preparing once more to enter the fray. "When it's all her fault, anyway——" But Betty upset both speech and dignity by unceremoniously pulling her down again.

"Come on! Hurry, Gracie!" she commanded. "And don't overlook any, because there's nothing so messy as a chocolate——"

"As if there were any chance of Grace's overlooking a chocolate!" scoffed Mollie. "Why, all she has to do is whistle to 'em and they come rolling up obediently."

"Goodness, who'd want them anyway, after they've rolled around and picked up all the dust and millions of germs from the bottom of the car?" grumbled Grace, cross at having to exert herself to even so small an extent. Grace, as my old readers doubtless remember, had been born with an ease-loving disposition that not even close association with the other Outdoor Girls had served to change. Perhaps, as Mollie had once remarked, that was why the girls were so fond of her—because she was "so different."

"Well, if you don't want 'em," Mollie replied practically, "why didn't you agree to my proposition? I promised to eat them for you, germs and all, and all I got for my sacrifice was one withering glance——"

"At that you're lucky," Grace retorted, straightening up from a spirited chase of the last elusive chocolate, red of face and fierce of eye. "Some time I'll come to the end of my patience, and then, Mollie Billette, you'd better look out."

"My!" chuckled Betty, "isn't she fierce? Never mind, honey, Roy will give you another box, if you ask him very prettily."

"Goodness, if he can't do it without being asked," retorted Grace crossly, "he can keep his old candies."

"If I thought you meant that, I'd say you ought to be ashamed of yourself," put in Amy, with unaccustomed spirit, as Mollie threw in the clutch and the big car started off again. "Anybody that had been as good to you as Roy has been——"

"Well, I don't know that you've been particularly neglected," retorted Grace, meaningly, while Amy reddened. "I never thought that Will could be such a perfect Romeo."

"Oh, dear," murmured Betty protestingly. "Can't we have just one good time, without bringing the boys into it?"

"Now, see who's talking," chuckled Mollie delightedly, changing into high and driving with wild, care-free recklessness along the smooth road. "Oh, Betty darling, much as I love you,

there do come times when you make me laugh."

"Well, it's good to know I'm bringing happiness into some dark life," retorted Betty good-naturedly. "At least I have not lived in vain."

"And they were just mad," Mollie continued, as though talking to herself, "when they found we were going off this afternoon without them."

"Yes, and isn't it funny?" agreed Grace lazily. "They think they're so important."

"Well, they are," announced Amy suddenly, and even Mollie turned an amazed eye upon her.

"I think they're the most important people in the world," Amy continued stoutly. "I guess if we were going to give up our lives for somebody else we might think we were important, too."

"Oh, I didn't mean that way," Mollie returned, her eyes once more turning to the ribbon of road ahead while the girls' bright faces sobered thoughtfully. "Because when it comes to a thing like giving up their lives—well, I think they're the bravest——" Her voice broke, and in an effort to hide her emotion she nearly sent the car over the side of the road and into a six-foot ditch.

"Brave," repeated Betty, turning her eyes to the far horizon to hide the mist that suddenly gathered in them. "I don't think that's any word for our boys at all——"

"They don't seem to realize what they're going

into," Amy broke in eagerly. "Or, if they do, they won't talk about it, or let any one else——"

"Oh, I guess it isn't that they don't realize it," Grace interrupted thoughtfully. "You know my father always used to say that a man who never knew what it was to be afraid wasn't really brave at all. He said it was the man who was scared to death in his heart, that gritted his teeth and went ahead and faced things anyway, that deserves all the credit."

"I presume that's right," said the Little Captain, leaning forward earnestly. "I don't suppose there is any one in the world who really enjoys the thought of losing an arm or a leg, or being broken in health for the rest of his life. I think what our boys are doing is just to take the fear of that with a smile and go ahead gayly to face whatever may come. Brave——" Her voice trailed off, and for a long time there was silence while the big car hummed rhythmically along the road and the miles swept by uncounted.

"Of course, there are lots of people," Betty resumed after a while, "who say the boys just enlisted for the love of adventure, the love of a good fight, and I suppose that had something to do with it."

"Of course it had," Mollie agreed. "And that's one thing that makes it harder for us who have

to stay at home and can't have any of the thrill and excitement that helps to carry the boys through. But it's only one of a dozen reasons, after all."

"I wish we knew when they were going," said Grace, irrelevantly. "The suspense is worse than anything else. It's like cutting a dog's tail off an inch at a time."

"Goodness, isn't she complimentary?" flung back Mollie, laughing. "You can compare yourself to a four-footed dog, Grace, but please leave me out of it."

"Did you ever hear of a two-footed dog?" Grace retorted.

"To change the subject," Betty interposed hastily, seeking to avoid a storm. "Don't you think it's almost time to be turning back? We've gone farther than—— Oh, Mollie! Girls! Look!"

They had rounded a curve in the road at their usual breakneck speed, and Mollie stopped the car with a jolt that very nearly sent its occupants flying into the roadway.

Before them, not twenty yards away, a little figure in black lay huddled in the road while the motorcyclist who had caused the accident, sped by the girls, exhaust open and head lowered.

Dazedly they gazed after machine and rider

for a minute till they disappeared round a turn in the road. Then, with a cry of dismay, Betty tumbled out of the car, followed by the other girls.

The prostrate figure in the road lay very, very still.

CHAPTER II

THE ACCIDENT

"BETTY, is she dead?"

"Oh, I hope not," said Betty, white-faced and pitying, as she bent over the little old woman. "That man ought to be hung! I'll loosen her collar. And, Grace, see if you can find some water. Hurry, dear."

And while the girls are ministering to the poor little victim of the accident, the opportunity will be taken to tell new readers something about the Outdoor Girls and their activities and adventures in other volumes of this series.

Betty Nelson, gay and fun-loving, possessed the natural gift of leadership which had earned for her the title of "Little Captain." The girls adored her and followed her unquestioningly wherever she led.

Grace Ford was a graceful, tall, pretty girl with a decided and insatiable fondness for chocolate candy. At the outbreak of the war, or rather, at the time of America's entry into the war, her

brother Will had caused her great unhappiness by his failure to enlist with the other boys of her acquaintance. The mystery had been satisfactorily explained later, however, and when this story opens, Will was on his way to make a splendid soldier in America's army of democracy.

There was a bit of French blood in Mollie Billette, or "Billy," as the girls sometimes called her. Bright black eyes which could, upon occasion, snap fire and a rather unruly temper attested to this French ancestry.

The last one of the quartette was Amy Blackford, quiet and retiring, but given to occasional outbursts which never failed to surprise and delight the girls. The mystery which at one time had surrounded her origin had been cleared up some years before by the finding of Henry Blackford, her long-lost brother.

How the girls formed a camping and tramp club and the fun they had on their interesting and adventurous tour, has been told in the first volume of the series, entitled "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale."

After this the girls had many adventures, first at Rainbow Lake, to which they went on another tour, this time in an automobile. From there they went to a winter camp where they had many varied and exciting experiences on skates and ice-

boats. Then followed a glorious trip to Florida, where the girls braved many dangers and took thrilling trips into the wilds of the interior.

Their next adventure took them to Ocean View and centered about a mysterious box they found in the sand.

Then followed that glorious trip to Pine Island. An aunt of Mollie Billette had turned her bungalow over to the Outdoor Girls for the summer. During their strenuous adventures the girls had made many friends among the boys and young men of Deepdale, and four of these had asked and been granted permission by the girls to accompany them to Pine Island and pitch their camp in the woods near by.

One of the young men was Allen Washburn, a rising young lawyer and a great admirer of Betty. Another was Will Ford, Grace's brother, and a third was his high school chum, Frank Haley. The fourth, Roy Anderson, had been drawn into the circle chiefly through his admiration for Grace.

During that eventful summer on Pine Island the young people had accidentally discovered a gypsy cave, concealed by underbrush, and had succeeded not only in rounding up the band of gypsies but in recovering several valuable articles that had been stolen from the girls.

Their last adventure, related in the volume directly preceding this one, and entitled "Outdoor Girls in Army Service," found the girls and boys again at Pine Island, but under very much altered conditions. America had entered the great World War and all the boys but Will Ford had volunteered. Later, the boys were called to Camp Liberty, some distance from Deepdale, and the girls conceived the plan of opening a Hostess House for the benefit of the relatives and friends of the boys. The plan worked out very satisfactorily.

While still at Pine Island the girls and boys had come upon a suspicious looking man in the woods. Upon finding himself discovered the man had made his escape, but in his hurry had dropped a letter which the girls found to their disgust was written in code. They decided that the man must have been a German spy.

At Camp Liberty the girls succeeded in rounding up the spy, and found, to their surprise, that Will Ford, who was in the Secret Service, had been engaged all that time in tracking him to earth. Will, having accomplished his mission, immediately enlisted.

Now, at the time this story opens, the girls were still at the Hostess House and looking forward apprehensively to the time, now imminent,

when the boys would be ordered across the sea to fight for the country they loved.

"I'll go with Grace," volunteered Amy, in answer to Betty's request for water. "I don't suppose we can find any, but we'll try."

The two girls hurried off, leaving Mollie and Betty to loosen the woman's collar and rub her cold hands.

"Betty, Betty, is she dead?" Mollie was crying for perhaps the hundredth time, when the woman herself answered the question by opening her eyes and looking vacantly about her.

"Who—are—you?" she queried faintly, struggling to rise.

"Oh, please don't try to get up just yet," Betty pleaded, looking very sweet and charming in her solicitude. "I don't think you're strong enough——"

But the woman seemed of a different mind, and made such a desperate effort to raise herself that Betty had no alternative but to help her to her feet.

The girls supported the unsteady little figure while the dim old eyes roved questioningly about.

"I—got—hurt!" she gasped, and then quite suddenly fainted again.

"Oh, Betty!" moaned Mollie, her face white with pity. "She's hurt worse, much worse, than

we thought she was! Oh, what shall we do?"

"There's only one thing to do," replied Betty, trying to hide the tremor in her voice. "We'll have to get her to the hospital, and in a hurry."

"But Grace and Amy!" gasped Mollie. "We can't go without them."

"We can at least get her into the car," Betty said, indicating the limp little figure in the roadway. "You take her feet, Mollie, and I'll take her head. We haven't spent all our lives outdoors for nothing."

Between them they succeeded in carrying their burden to the car and settled her gently in the tonneau.

"Oh, if Grace and Amy would only come!" Mollie was crying distractedly when the girls themselves burst through the underbrush, crying despairingly that they had not been able to find water, that there was not a house anywhere for miles around.

But Betty cut their lamentations short and hurried them into the car.

"But where do I come in?" gasped Grace, as Betty dropped into the back seat beside the little old woman and took the poor unconscious head in her arms.

"Oh, anywhere," answered Betty indifferently, her mind on one object only. "On the floor or on

the roof or anywhere, only hurry. Now, Mollie dear, drive as you never drove before."

Mollie obediently threw in the clutch, and the heavy car shot forward, throwing Grace to a seat on the floor where she fell with more haste than dignity.

Nobody noticed her, however, and even a growing bump on her forehead received scant attention. All were too intent upon the matter at hand.

At this spot the road was very narrow and on each side sloped down sharply about ten or twelve feet to the level of the fields. It seemed almost an impossibility to turn the car in that narrow space without precipitating it down either one or the other of the steep banks.

After many fruitless attempts and barely escaped tragedies, however, Mollie finally succeeded, and the car was sent flying down the white stretch of road that led to Camp Liberty and the hospital.

"Oh, I hope we'll get there in time," Amy murmured over and over again, and kept looking at the pathetic little victim. "Is she still breathing, Betty? Are you sure?"

To this Betty always nodded in the affirmative, her little mouth grimly set, her eyes fixed steadily ahead, as though she would draw their destina-

tion nearer to them by the very force of her desire.

"I wonder," Mollie flung back at them from between clenched teeth, "what that motorcyclist looked like. I'd like to meet him again—with a firing squad."

"Why I saw him," came Grace's muffled voice from the floor of the car.

"So did I," added Amy.

"So you would recognize him again?" Mollie demanded eagerly, swerving the car perilously near the edge of the road.

"Are you sure?" added Betty, taking her eyes from the far horizon and regarding Grace intently.

Both girls nodded vigorously.

"His head was down, of course," Amy continued, "but I'd know his face in a minute if I saw it again. Eyes close together, long nose——"

"And a little mustache," Grace finished eagerly. "The kind Percy Falconer used to wear and we girls called an eyebrow on his lip."

"He must have been a thing of beauty," commented Mollie.

"He had the meanest kind of face," said Amy, with a little shudder. "The kind you wouldn't like to meet on a dark night."

"I should have judged as much from your

description," said Betty dryly. "There's one good thing about him—we ought to be able to recognize him easily."

"You talk as though you expected to meet him again," said Amy, looking at her curiously.

"I do," answered Betty determinedly. "Some time we're going to find that fellow and make him pay for what he's done. Think of it!" she added, turning upon them suddenly while her eyes flashed fire. "To run down a helpless old woman in the road and then not even stop to find out whether you've killed her or not! We'll find him if we have to search the country for fifty miles around!"

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOW OF MYSTERY

THE girls never forgot that mad ride to Camp Liberty. Mile after mile sped by on wings, and it was not till they were on the outskirts of the town itself that the victim of the accident showed signs of returning consciousness.

Then she sighed, moved her head a little restlessly on Betty's shoulder, and opened her eyes.

"Oh, dear," she said, faintly but so abruptly that Betty and Grace started. "I knew I'd have —to do it—some day!"

When the girls came to know her better they no longer wondered at her quaint and unexpected sayings. But at the moment this queer statement, coming as it did from one who they thought must be hovering at death's door, rather startled them.

"Wh—what?" stammered Betty, bewildered, while the others stared with wide eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said," replied the surprising old woman, in a

stronger voice, trying unsteadily to straighten herself in the seat and raising trembling hands to her rather dilapidated old hat, "that I was sure to come to it some day. There's a fate in such things."

The girls looked at each other uncertainly, and into the minds of each flashed the startled suspicion that perhaps the poor old soul was mentally defective. Or, maybe, the accident——

The woman seemed to sense something of their bewilderment, and into her eyes, still bright in spite of her age and what she had just gone through, there came a twinkle—yes, a real twinkle.

"No, I'm not crazy," she assured them, regaining her strength with amazing quickness. "You see, it seemed kind o' funny to me after all these years o' swearin' that I'd never ride in one o' these gasoline cars to find myself in one after all, —and at my time o' life."

The girls gasped with relief, but still had the strange feeling of one who has been speeding over the water with all sails set and suddenly finds herself in the midst of a dead calm.

"B-but," stammered Amy, voicing the general sentiment, "we thought—were afraid—you were hurt badly——"

"Guess maybe I'd have thought so, too, if I'd

had the chance," responded the surprising old lady ruefully. "Pretty well mussed up, I guess, and stunned. Shouldn't wonder if I found a heap o' bruises around me somewhere—but no bones broke. You see," she added, as though imparting a great secret, "the Sandersons' bones jest never was made to break. Now, there was our cousins—the Petersons—they was different. One o' that family wouldn't dare waggle his finger too hard for fear it would bust on him. You see, they was just naturally made that way. My son, Willie," here the brave voice lowered a trifle and tears rose to the bright old eyes, "he used to call them in fun—always jokin', that boy was—the Break-bone Petersons."

"But are you sure you aren't hurt?" Betty insisted, still with that curious feeling of having the wind taken out of her sails. "You see," she added hastily, as the twinkle returned to the old woman's eyes, "we were going to take you to the hospital, but if you are really sure there are no bones broken, I think you would like the Hostess House better."

"Hostess House?" repeated the old woman, her eyes widening with interest. "Yes, I've heard a lot about those places. That's where the sweethearts and mothers and wives of the soldier boys go, isn't it—to meet them——?"

"Yes," Betty responded eagerly. "You see, that's what we are doing, helping to make them feel at home. That's why we want you to come with us now and stay there until you feel better."

"But I'm not a mother, or a wife, or a sweetheart of any of those boys," objected the little old woman, while the same cloud swept over her face, leaving it wrinkled and old. "I—I might have been—if—if—Willie——"

"But that doesn't make any difference," Grace assured her, speaking for the first time and laying a white, soft hand over the knotted, wrinkled one. "We want you to stay with us and rest while we try to find the man who ran you down."

"Oh, him!" cried the old woman scornfully, all the time patting Grace's hand with gentle fingers. "There's no use wastin' time lookin' for him. He'll make pretty sure that he won't be seen round these parts again—not for some time, anyway. But you're dear, sweet little ladies," she added, looking from Betty, whose arm still rested about her shoulders to Grace's hand in hers and from them to the two girls in front. "You're awfully sweet little ladies," she repeated, while the quick tears rose to her eyes. "I don't see why you're bein' so kind to me——"

"But we just love to do anything we can,"

broke in Betty quickly, for the Outdoor Girls never liked to be thanked. "And we'd like so much to have you see our Hostess House. That is, if you'd care to," she added, suddenly remembering that the old woman might not be so helpless and alone as she had seemed—might have made some other plans. But the latter quickly reassured her.

"Oh, I would like to, more than anything else in the world," she replied eagerly, then, realizing that her fervor might astonish the girls, added with a little forced laugh. "You see, it's a weakness o' mine. Maybe it's because I'm getting old —but, the soldier boys—I can't seem to see enough o' them——"

"I don't think it's got anything to do with getting old," Mollie broke in irrepressibly, "because I feel just that way about it myself. The more I see, the more I want to see."

The woman's eyes twinkled again. She was about to make some sort of comment, but at that moment Mollie swung the car into the street leading to the Hostess House, and the girls gave a little surprised exclamation at finding themselves so nearly there.

A few minutes later they were ushering their shabby little guest into the comfortable alcove off the main reception room and settling her so-

licitously in one of the cushion-filled window seats.

It was astonishing to see how quickly their patient had recovered from the accident. She seemed a little weak and unsteady as they helped her from the car, but going up the steps to the Hostess House she resolutely refused all assistance and mounted the porch alone.

"Isn't she a darling?" Mollie had whispered to Grace as they brought up the rear. "Did you ever see anybody of her age so full of life and independence?"

And it was that same sturdy independence and humor that endeared her to the girls in the days that followed and made them willing to do anything in their power to help her.

There was some discussion at first as to where they could put their unexpected guest, for all the rooms were full and a couple of unused emergency cots seemed to be all the extra accommodations they could find.

"I have it," cried Betty at last, with one of her inspirations. "Grace and I will give up our room and bunk in with Amy and Mollie. That's where the two extra cots will come in good."

The idea was applauded enthusiastically, and it took only a short time of scurrying about to put it into action.

"But one thing we must remember," Betty cautioned the others, as they surveyed their work with satisfaction. "We mustn't let our old lady guess a word of what we've been doing."

"Oh, no, we mustn't," agreed Amy in alarm. "She'd be just as apt as anything to put on her hat and leave us without a word."

"You know, it is going to be rather close quarters," sighed Grace, as they turned to leave the room. "We won't be able to move without falling over somebody's feet."

"You needn't look at mine," Mollie retorted with spirit. "Why is it that whenever you make a disparaging remark you never fail to look at me?"

"That's easy," Grace returned with a twinkle. "All you have to do is to look in your mirror——"

"Oh dear, and I suggested it," mourned Betty, as they descended the stairs arm in arm. "We'll have to give them the cots, Amy; it would be murderous to let those two sleep together."

"Ah, 'tis a deep, dark plot," cried Mollie, staggering dramatically and almost falling downstairs. "I see it all—they get the bed while we, poor wretches that we are, toss our uneasy bones upon the cot——"

Amy screamed and Grace covered her ears.

"Goodness, what do you think this is—a ghost's retreat?" demanded the latter, while Betty chuckled joyfully. "'Toss our uneasy bones,' indeed!"

"Does sound kind of grizzly, doesn't it?" Mollie admitted. "Just the same, I wager that's what Betty intended."

"Mollie, you wrong me!" cried Betty in dismay. "I was simply trying to avoid a tragedy. But, if you're going to toss bones, anyway, you might as well do it in comfort; so——"

"Oh, you goose," cried Mollie affectionately, and in this manner they entered the den where Mrs. Watson was entertaining, or being entertained by, the little old woman.

The girls immediately took possession of the latter and joyfully escorted her to the upper floor to look over her new quarters.

"My, isn't this fine!" exclaimed the guest, her face lighting up happily. "A beautiful big bed and three fine windows to see the soldier boys from. Are you sure," she added, glancing from one to the other of the four eager faces suspiciously, "that I'm not putting you out? Because, if I am——"

"Why of course you're not," Betty fibbed stoutly, adding, with a swift change of subject: "But I'm sure now that you would like to rest.

Look," she added, with quick solicitude, as she saw how white the old lady had become, "your hands are trembling——"

"No, no, no," disclaimed the little old woman impatiently, as she gazed with set face out of the window that faced upon the parade. "I'm a little cold. And—that boy——" She pointed with quivering finger at a sturdy, khaki-clad figure, swinging happily over the parade in the direction of the mess-hall, "He—he reminded me——"

"Yes," they cried, crowding about her solicitously, while Betty pushed a chair toward the window and gently forced her into it.

"He—he was—just like——" The slight form was shaking and the words forced themselves from between her chattering teeth, "what my Willie boy would have been now—if he hadn't—run away. My little son! My baby!"

CHAPTER IV

MRS. SANDERSON'S STORY

TEARS were not only in her eyes now, but running down her wrinkled old face, and the girls, with the tears of real pity in their own eyes, crowded closer about her.

"Would it help," Betty suggested gently, "if you told us about it?"

The old lady drew her gaze from the window and let it rest on the sweet, sympathetic young face, and she nodded slowly.

"I guess maybe it would," she agreed, taking a handkerchief from the pocket in her dress and wiping her eyes. "You see, I never have told anybody for years and years, and if it hadn't been for this war I suppose I should have gone right on not telling anybody for the rest of my life. Of course the Yates and Baldwins and all the folks that lived around us knew it, so there was no use telling them——" Her voice trailed off and her eyes sought the window with its

vista of parade ground and low, roughly built barracks buildings.

The girls looked at her. Never in their lives, they thought, had they been so thoroughly interested in anything as they were in the secret sorrow of this gentle old lady, the sorrow that brought that strange cloud of unhappiness every time she mentioned this son of hers who had run away.

"He must have been a pretty ungrateful sort," thought Mollie resentfully, "to have run away from a mother who loved him like that."

Once more the old lady drew her eyes from the window and fixed them on the circle of eager young faces.

"I suppose young things like you couldn't be expected to understand," she went on, "and yet perhaps you'll be interested more than other folks, 'count of your having met so many young boys."

"Oh, we are interested," they cried in chorus, at which the old woman's face lighted up and she went on with more cheerfulness.

"Well, to begin with," she said, "we lived way at t'other end o' the world. Danestown, it was called, and my husband—better man never breathed—died when my little boy was only four years old. I wasn't so young any more, for Willie was the youngest—the others had all died when they was babies—and Willie's pa and me was

getting along in years when he come to us—the dearest, sweetest, prettiest baby you ever set your eyes on.

"Well, we had managed to save some little money, though 'twasn't over much at best, and with me workin' on the farm week days and Sundays, we managed to get along pretty well. An' I was savin' pennies——" Here the old voice trembled and nearly broke, so that it was some minutes before the speaker could go on.

The girls tried hard to think of something to say, but as everything that came to them sounded flat and inappropriate, they kept a sympathetic silence—which was perhaps the best they could have done, after all.

"As I was sayin'," the old voice continued after a while, "I was squeezin' every little penny I could from the bare necessities to lay aside for the boy. You see, it had been his father's wish that Willie should be given the chance neither of us had ever had to get some schoolin' and have his chance in the world. I was hopin' that by the time the boy grew up I might maybe have enough to send him to college.

"Of course," she added, with an air of apologizing for a weakness that went straight to the girls' hearts, "they was only dreams. But I don't see as there was any harm in them, seein's I

always kept them to myself an' never told anybody 'bout them—leastways, no one but Willie.

"Sometimes, on a winter night when the snow was fallin' outside an' the wind was howlin' round the house, I used to draw Willie up to the big, open fireplace we had in the kitchen and tell him 'bout his pa an' how he had always wished for Willie to be a fine, big man.

"An' Willie, he'd listen with those big, earnest eyes o' his—such beautiful eyes my Willie had——" Again the voice broke and trailed off into silence while the girls sat and waited as before, only with a stronger pity in their hearts for this faithful little old woman who had loved so well—and lost.

"An' then," the voice continued, more softly and dreamily than before, my little boy would reach up and pat my cheek, just like his father used to do, and seems like I can hear his voice now, just as plain as I did all those long, long years ago.

" 'Maw,' he'd say, drawlin' a little in his cunnin' way, 'just don't you worry. I'll do all those things, jest like pa said, an' then we'll go an' live in a big house an' you won't have to work so hard any more—jest be happy.'

"An' then he'd take my hand that was coarse an' rough from workin' in the field and rub his

soft little cheek against it an' look up at me, an' just smile——"

There was a little sob from the spot where Amy was sitting cross-legged on the floor, while the other girls were frankly and openly crying and not even noticing it.

"He—he must have been a darling!" cried Betty, unsteadily.

"He was," answered the old lady simply. "It wasn't very long after that he ran away, and I suppose"—again her eyes sought the parade ground—"if I was to meet him now I maybe wouldn't know him. You see, I'd still be lookin' for my little brown-eyed, yellow-haired Willie boy."

"But what made him run away?" asked Mollie, rubbing her eyes furiously with her handkerchief. "I shouldn't have thought——"

"Neither would I," the strange little woman interrupted abruptly. "If he hadn't had such a high spirit he never would. But—well, seem like I'm gettin' ahead of my story.

"You see, some o' the neighbors' children was a pretty wild lot an' they always had a grudge against my boy 'cause he wouldn't join them in all their escapades.

"You see, Willie took a lot after his father. He used to just like to sit and dream and read

books you'd thought a little fellow like him couldn't understand at all—he was just twelve when he ran away.

"An' o' course these other boys, they didn't like him 'cause he was different, an' they was always layin' the blame for all their pranks on him.

"But my Willie, it didn't bother him much. He used to tell me that as long as he knew he didn't do it and I knew it, what other folks thought wasn't worth worryin' 'bout—just his pa all over.

"Only, I remember one time," the bent old form straightened up proudly and the bright old eyes gleamed, "when the other boys started pushin' things too far an' begun callin' my boy names—no names that a boy with any pride in him would stand for—— I heard them—they was jest around the back o' the house, an' I came to the door with my mad up to the boilin' point, but what I saw made me stop right short an' wait for what I knew was goin' to happen.

"Willie, he was sittin' on a log by the barn, jest wrapped up in a new book he'd found, an' it was some time before just what those ragamuffins was sayin' seeped in. When it did was when I came to the door, boilin' with rage.

"Very quiet, but with a sort o' bulldog set to

that chin o' his, just like his pa, he closed his book an' laid it down beside him.

"'I'll be askin' you,' he said, drawlin' very marked and facin' the bully o' the crowd that was at least two or three years older than he was—'I'll be askin' you to say what you been sayin' all over again.'

"The bully did, with trimmin's, an' Willie listened without turnin' a hair till he got all through.

"'Now,' he says, more quiet than ever—I can see him now, with his big eyes blazin' black out o' his white face and his little hands that seemed to me scarce more'n a baby's clenched tight at his side—'Now, I guess, I got to lick you!'

"An' he did!"

"He beat him?" cried Mollie excitedly. "Oh, weren't you proud?"

"I guess I was!" answered the little old woman, her eyes snapping with the memory. "That was the day my boy showed what was in him, an' after that the other boys never called him any more names.

"But, o' course," she added, while the old cloud erased the glow from her face, "that didn't keep the boys from wantin' to get even.

"Well, then came the awful day when Abner Conway's barn burned an' Abner himself came

over to accuse my Willie of havin' started the fire, bringin' with him two or three o' the boys who had tried to call Willie names to swear they'd seen him do it.

"O' course Willie denied it an' I backed him up by sayin'—an' there never was truer word spoken—that Willie was with me before an' at the time the barn took fire.

"But it didn't do any good. Abner was ragin' because it meant considerable loss to him, an' so much blame had been laid at Willie's door by the other boys that he declared this time he was goin' to have him punished.

" 'I'll have the law on him!' he shouted, rampagin' round my kitchen like a wild animal. 'I'll show that boy o' yours if he can go round settin' folks' barns on fire an' not get come up with! I'll give him a taste o' what it feels like to be behind bars. It's time somethin' was done, an', by Jerry, I'm the one to do it!'

"An' without another word he slammed out with those grinnin' imps that was makin' all the trouble followin' at his heels. Well, there isn't very much more to tell."

Here she paused, the animation left her face and she looked pityfully old and weary. Betty reached over and patted her hand, and finally she resumed her story.

"Abner kept his word and brought the sheriff around that same afternoon, but they couldn't find Willie—he was gone. He'd left a note for me—full o' love—but sayin' that he couldn't bear to bring disgrace on me an' so he'd gone away. When he'd done what his pa wanted him to, he said, he'd come back an' then we could live in the big house an' be happy.

"An' from that day to this, I've never heard a word from my little boy."

"Oh," cried Betty, pityingly, "what a terrible thing! I should think he could have written. But maybe he did, and his letters never reached you."

"That old Abner must have been a beast," cried Mollie, clenching her hands belligerently. "And those boys! Wouldn't I like to put them behind the bars?"

"You see," the old lady went on tonelessly, "it was only a little while after Willie ran away that they found out that tramps started the fire. Of course Abner was sorry then, but it was too late. My boy was gone."

"But you'll find him yet," cried Betty hopefully, springing to her feet. "I'm quite sure you will."

But the old lady shook her head sadly.

"I don't think so, my dear," she said slowly. "If my Willie boy had been alive I'm sure he

would have come to me. He's—he's—almost certain—to be—dead."

The girls tried to comfort the little old woman for a few minutes more, then had to hurry away to various duties about the Hostess House—Mollie to help a young Polish boy who had been drafted into the army and who was struggling valiantly and conscientiously to learn English, Grace to write a letter for a Southern mountain boy who had never learned to read and write, and Amy and Betty to help a timid and somewhat helpless mother through the long hours of waiting before she could have a brief visit with her son during his time of relief from duty.

CHAPTER V

FUN AND SOLDIERS

"I WISH we could do something for Mrs. Sanderson," Betty remarked with a sigh. "I haven't slept a wink for two nights just trying to think out some way of finding that boy of hers."

"He must have been a darling," Grace added thoughtfully. "I can't understand how a boy like that could run away from home and stay away for years without even trying to get in touch with his mother."

"Maybe that charge changed his character," Mollie suggested dramatically. "I've heard of such things."

"I've read of 'em," sniffed Grace. "But I must say I never believed it. Give a boy the right sort of character to start with——"

"I don't see where you get that," Mollie interrupted hotly. "Why, half the criminals in the world are made up of boys who were good enough to start with, but because of some temptation, or their environment, went wrong——"

"But Mrs. Sanderson's Willie wasn't a criminal," suggested Amy mildly.

"But he was accused of being one and threatened with jail," retorted Mollie. "And how do you know that wasn't just what he needed to start him on the downward path——"

"Heavens, how melodramatic," drawled Grace. "Here, Mollie dear, have a candy and try to cheer up."

"Then I'd have indigestion and never cheer up," retorted Mollie crossly. "Sometimes you make me feel as if I were on a little island completely surrounded by chocolates, Grace, and whenever anything bothered me I'd only have to eat one—a chocolate, I mean, not the island—to forget all my troubles."

"Oh, bliss," sighed Grace ecstatically. "If you have discovered any such wonderful island, Mollie darling, lead me to it, and I will spend all the rest of my life worshipping you."

"When you're not too busy gobbling the chocolates," Mollie returned with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Which reminds me," broke in Betty, shaking off the thoughtful mood that had taken possession of her, "that this is the day of our picnic, and if we don't get back to the Hostess House pretty soon the boys will be there before we have even made a sandwich."

"Goodness," cried Mollie in consternation, "all this talk about criminals put the boys entirely out of my head."

"I should hope so," twinkled Betty. "Our boys are as little apt to remind us of criminals as anybody I know. But seriously," she added, a little of the thoughtfulness returning, "I think we're making a mistake in thinking that Willie Sanderson has become a criminal. I think there is probably some satisfactory explanation of why he stayed away from home; and perhaps with the help of the people we know we may be able to solve the mystery. Anyway, I don't believe that a boy like that and with a mother like this dear old soul could turn out very badly."

"But suppose he's dead!" Mollie put in.

"Well, then our days of detectivities will be over as far as he's concerned," put in Grace before Betty could reply. "Here, Mollie, take another chocolate and don't ask foolish questions."

"Goodness, I think you're going to die, Gracie," said Mollie, looking her friend over anxiously. "This is the first time since the fateful day of our meeting that I can remember your offering, actually offering, me two chocolates in succession."

"It isn't the first time you've taken them, though," suggested Grace dryly. "It just oc-

curred to me that since you will take them anyway, I might as well get the credit of offering them."

"Ah, I guessed it, villainness," cried Mollie darkly. "I have long suspected that that lovely face hid a soul of venom—I should say, a venomous soul——"

The girls chuckled and Grace answered lightly:

"Well, as long as you admit my beauty I don't care what you say about the rest."

"Ah, heartless one——" Mollie was beginning, when with a laugh Betty hooked an arm through hers and hustled the dramatic one in very undramatic fashion, up the steps into the Hostess House.

"Oh, Betty, you are so impulsive," sighed Mollie, as she was finally permitted a chair in the kitchen. "If you don't stop rushing around so you'll have me worn to skin and bones——"

"Goodness, have you got those things, too?" asked Betty, as she hurried busily from table to pantry and back again. "Please don't be so lazy, Mollie dear. The boys will be here before we're half ready, and we don't want to lose a minute of this perfect day."

Harder heart than Mollie's must have softened at this appeal, and she set to work with a will preparing delicacies for this picnic with the boys

—perhaps the thought was accompanied by a strange, panicky sinking of the heart—the very last picnic they would have together, at least until after the war.

"Did Allen have any more news for you, yesterday?" Mollie asked suddenly, following up this train of thought.

"No, nothing definite," the Little Captain responded, deftly slipping currant jelly into layers of buttered biscuit. "Of course, he said there were all sorts of rumors, but since they all came from equally good sources and no two of them pointed the same way, he wasn't listening to any of them. All they really know is that the regiment is all ready and equipped and will surely be on its way very soon."

"I'm not even thinking of it," said Mollie, slamming down the cover of the bread box by way of emphasis, as Amy and Grace came upon the scene. "I don't dare to let myself think," she repeated.

"That's right, dear, I wouldn't either," approved Grace, patting her encouragingly on the back as she passed on her way to the pantry. "You want to get your mind used to it by degrees, otherwise the shock might be too great. What's that, Betty—the sugar? Surely. Anything to be agreeable!"

The last hamper had just been done up, filled to the brim with good things, when the boys arrived.

"Heavens, I'm a fright," cried Grace, viewing herself in the kitchen mirror—a mirror, by the way, which brought out all a person's bad points with Puritan honesty.

"Go in and keep the boys quiet, Amy, that's a dear," she begged, then, seeing refusal in Amy's eyes, added cajolingly: "You always look as if you came out of a bandbox yourself, you know. Please, dear——"

But Amy was already half way up the backstairs and paused to make a face at her.

"Taffy!" she cried succinctly.

Five minutes later the three girls, in various attitudes of impatience, were waiting for Grace while she still primped before the mirror.

"Just one minute more I give you," stated Mollie, regarding her wrist watch frowningly.

"Oh, Mollie, if you only wouldn't talk so much," sighed Grace, turning with an air of resignation from the mirror. "As soon as you begin to talk everything goes wrong. My gloves walk under the bed, and my hair stands on end——"

"Goodness," cried Mollie, looking injured, "anybody'd think I was a ghost. I'll stand for being called lots of things, but a phantom—Ouch!

Now what's the idea?" For Grace's thumb and forefinger had come together in the fleshy part of her arm.

"I was just trying to reassure you," explained Grace innocently, as Mollie stared indignantly. "There's nothing the least bit ethereal——"

But Mollie waited to hear no more, and sped down the stairs after Betty to bounce unceremoniously in upon the boys.

"Beware!" she cried. "A lunatic is about to descend upon us!"

"I should say one had already," grinned Allen, at which Mollie surrendered.

"Everybody's against me," she sighed. "When one whom I have always called my friend, turns agin me—— Never mind," she added diplomatically, "I made the layer cake, Allen Washburn——"

"Oh, Mollie, let me carry your pocketbook," begged Allen in alarm.

"How do I know you're honest?" she retorted with a twinkle, and peace was once more restored.

The young folks paired off as usual, and Allen drew Betty a little behind the others. The two formed so handsome a couple that many a passer-by stopped and looked back after them with an admiring smile.

The camp training had improved Allen wonderfully. Always splendidly athletic, he carried himself with a poise and moved with a swing that spoke of perfectly trained muscles, while his handsome face had been tanned to the color of an Indian's.

No wonder that when Allen bent toward her and spoke in a certain tone reserved for her alone, Betty found it hard to look at this tall, bronzed soldier who had been her faithful cavalier for—oh, she could not remember how long.

"I haven't seen you for ages," he murmured, and she glanced sideways at him, dimpling.

"Not for twenty-four whole hours," she agreed soberly. "Wasn't it this time yesterday——"

"What has yesterday to do with it?" he interrupted ardently. "I tell you when a fellow's to be parted from the thing he wants most in the world every twenty-four hours count——"

"Allen!" she cried, turning upon him in swift alarm, "is it settled then? Have you learned anything definite?"

He shook his head, while his laughing eyes said things that made her turn her own away.

"Then why," she asked, with a little pout, "do you have to scare me so?"

"Because," he answered happily, "there's noth-

ing I like better than to see you scared—about that," he added quickly, as she turned an indignant glance upon him.

For a moment it seemed as if anger were there to stay, but it was impossible to be very angry with Allen—when he looked at one like that. At least Betty thought so.

"You'd better be careful," she said with a soft little laugh. "If you try that too much, I may not believe you when the real time comes."

"Betty," he cried fervently, "I won't ever do it again—I promise you. At least," he added, straightening up, while in his eyes grew a great resolve, "not until—that real time comes!

"But what have you girls been doing this morning?" he went on, after a pause.

The girl gave an amused but sympathetic laugh before she answered. Then she said:

"Mollie and I have been trying to keep the hearts of three of those recruits that came in yesterday from breaking outright. Poor boys, they're awfully young—I believe they fibbed about their ages—and look like cherubs. None of them has ever been away from home before, and they are pathetically homesick. But they have told us about their homes and their mothers and fathers and the little brothers and sisters, and Mollie has joked with them and—— Well, any-

way, Allen, I believe we have made them feel that they are not wholly friendless."

"I'm sure you have, Betty dear."

"Poor boys," went on Betty. "I presume it will get easier as they get used to it.

"Grace has been writing letters for some of the boys who find it hard to do that. Grace is awfully good at that. And Amy, I believe, has been showing some girls who came down to see their brother, about the place and trying to keep them interested during the long waits between the times they can see the boy, who, like his sisters, is almost too timid to look out for himself."

Admiration shone in Allen Washburn's eyes as he looked at the Little Captain and remarked:

"What lucky people those Y. W. C. A. officials were to get you girls down here for this Hostess House! But come, Betty, the others are beckoning to us."

CHAPTER VI

PLANNING CAPTURE

THE spot they had chosen for the picnic was quite a distance away from Camp Liberty, and by the time the party finally reached it, both boys and girls were wondering if the generous contents of the hampers would serve even to take the edge off their appetites.

"I don't see why we didn't take your car, Mollie," Grace complained, as they covered the last stretch of dusty road. "We would have been on the picnic grounds and had our llunch eaten bv this time."

"But just think what's in store for us," Betty reminded her cheerily. "We need a good appetite to eat up all this lunch."

"Well, I don't know," Grace grumbled back. "It seems to me I had a good enough appetite for two lunches, each twice as big as this, when we started."

"Heavens!" cried Frank Haley, who was walk-

ing in front with Mollie, "I see my chances of a square meal dwindling."

"I'm beginning to agree with Grace," grinned Roy Anderson, "that we made a big mistake in not taking the car."

"Oh, you're all just lazy," was Mollie's accusation. "We haven't been walking more than an hour and there's the spot, just around that turn in the road."

"Say," and Will, who had not yet spoken, turned suddenly to Betty, "isn't this the road where the accident happened that introduced that nice little old woman—what's her name——"

"Mrs. Sanderson," Betty supplied.

"Yes, that's it. Isn't this about the place where you found her?"

"Goodness, no," put in Amy. "It was on this road, but we were miles out of town."

"Will, I'd love you all the rest of my life if you'd only find that motorcyclist and have him punished," said Betty fervently. "It makes me wild when I think how easily he got away from us——"

"Never mind that," interrupted Will, his eyes twinkling. "All I want is to have you repeat the first part of your speech. What was that about loving me all the rest of my life?"

"Say, what's the idea?" demanded Allen sud-

denly, having been engrossed in a little dream all his own. "What kind of rash promises are you asking Betty to make?"

"Well, I would," contended Betty stoutly, adding with a twinkle: "Like a sister."

"Oh," said Will, turning disappointedly away. "If that's all you have to offer me——"

"But I've got lots more than that," Betty assured him quickly. "Why, Will, if you're real good, I may even give you an extra piece of cake."

"Well, now, that's different again," cried Will, his interest rekindling.

"Will," remonstrated Grace plaintively, "I'm surprised at you. You are really getting shockingly material."

"Getting!" interjected Frank, with a grin.

"Go on, Betty, never mind this vulgar rabble—with apologies to you, sweet sister," as Grace shot an indignant glance at him. "You were saying that if I found this motorcyclist you'd give me an extra piece of cake, or words to that effect. Am I right?"

"Perfectly," laughed Betty, then added, seriously: "But, really, I think something ought to be done."

"So do I," Amy backed her up stoutly. "We ought to let those old motorcyclists know they

can't run over poor old ladies whenever they feel like it——"

"Favorite outdoor sports," murmured Roy.

"It was the most heartless thing I ever saw," said Mollie, entering into the discussion with a will. "He never even stopped to find out what damage had been done. He might have killed her——"

"But what wouldst thee, sweet damsel?" asked Will patiently. "We can hardly go out on the broad highway and hold up every motorcyclist that comes along——"

"Well, I know what you could do," said Grace, with unusual animation. "You could take one of us along to point out the suspicious characters."

"Yes, we got a fine view of him," added Amy eagerly. "He had small eyes close together——"

"Regular villain type," murmured Frank, but Amy refused to be side-tracked.

"And goggles——"

"They all have those," interrupted Roy.

"And a tiny little mustache that looked as if it had got there by mistake."

"Probably false," suggested Will. "One of the kind you stick on with molasses—like feathers——"

"Oh, do be sensible," cried Mollie impatiently. "Of course you can't go holding him up at the

point of a gun, but there ought to be something——"

"Give us time, give us time," Allen interrupted. "Wasn't it Antony who had time and conquered, or something like that——"

"Goodness, anybody'd know you'd been out of school a long time," drawled Grace scathingly. "Mark Antony, indeed!"

"Well, it was one of those guys, anyway," maintained Allen, with admirable impartiality. "And you have to admit the sentiment was fine. All we ask is time——"

"And a little grub," supplemented Will hungrily. "It seems to me I remember somebody saying a couple of hours ago that we were even then approaching our destination, and we seem to be getting no nearer rapidly——"

"Oh, do try to be sensible," cried Mollie, for the second time. "If you would only have some patience——"

"Never heard the word," declared Will with a grin, and Mollie made a face at him—a very disrespectful face.

"Well, but when——" Will was insisting plaintively when Betty interrupted him with a cry of delight.

"Look, people," she said, breaking away from them and running up the rather steep bank lightly.

"This isn't the spot we picked out, but it's twice as pretty. Big rocks for tables—and everything."

"Especially everything," commented Allen, his eyes twinkling.

"Oh, boy!" cried Roy ecstatically, setting down the hamper that had been his share and beginning to examine its contents without further delay. "Chicken! Ham sandwiches! Biscuits! Jelly——"

"Say, get out of that!" cried Frank, snatching the hamper away with a vigor born of fear. "What kind of manners do you call that?"

"They're as good as yours," retorted the outraged Roy hotly. "Besides, there's another hamper, isn't there?"

"Goodness, they seem to think they can have a whole basket apiece," cried Amy Blackford in dismay.

"Well, I guess they've got another think coming," said Allen, inelegantly, placing himself with outstretched arms before the two precious hampers as though he were guarding a gold mine. "Now let him come who dares. Only over my dead body——"

"Oh, what's the use of spoiling our perfectly good party," complained Grace. "Can't we ever begin to enjoy ourselves but what somebody starts

taking all the joy out of life by talking about killing somebody, or something——"

"Never mind, Gracie," Frank soothed her, nibbling a chicken bone with great relish. "You'll get over it. It may take time——"

"Silence," commanded Mollie, raising a pickle fork threateningly. "Else in a twinkling I will split thee to the heart——"

"Goodness, she's got it, too," sighed Grace drawlingly.

"What?" asked Mollie briskly, "I'm always interested in my symptoms——"

"It isn't a disease, you goose," drawled Grace. "Unless," she added, as a second thought, "you can call insanity a disease——"

"Well, you ought to know," retorted Mollie, as she proceeded to use the pickle fork to advantage. "What does your doctor say?"

"Now who's bringing war into the party, I'd like to know?" asked Will, helping himself to his ninth biscuit.

"Goodness, that's just the usual thing," Betty explained, looking prettier, so Allen thought, than ever before with the background of lacy green to set off her bright coloring. "If they don't behave like that we know they're sick or something. Do have another biscuit, Roy. Goodness," and she stared round-eyed down into the empty space

where the biscuits had been, "they're every one gone! Who did eat them all?"

"Well, you needn't look at me," said Frank in an aggrieved tone. "Will's the fellow you've got to watch."

Will was about to utter some scathing retort when Grace, who had gotten up to shake the crumbs from her dress and had walked down toward the road, suddenly called to them. It was such an excited, urgent call that they left everything and came running.

"What——" began Betty.

"It was the motorcyclist!" cried Grace, her face flaming. "I couldn't have been mistaken, because I caught a good view of his face."

"But what was he doing back here?" demanded Amy, while the rest stared at Grace excitedly. "That's only a rutty old wagon road, and——"

"Well, he was bumping and bouncing like everything, and when he caught sight of me he sent his machine ahead so fast I thought surely he'd have a smash-up."

"Wish he had," said gentle Amy, and at the unusually vindictive expression on her face the others had to laugh.

"Well, there's nothing more we can do now," said Frank practically. "Let's go back and finish our lunch. Probably," he added, as they thought-

fully retraced their steps, "he took the wagon road for fear of running into one of you girls."

"Big coward!" cried Betty, with clenched hands. "I wish I had been with you, Grace, we might have stopped him."

The boys shouted.

"Such a chance!" crowed Roy, but Betty turned on them with flashing eyes.

"Well, we might at least have tried," she cried hotly. "That is more than you boys would have done. You don't seem to be even interested," she continued indignantly. "If I were a man in uniform I'd show that coward that he can't knock old helpless women down and then run away. I'd show him that in insulting an old woman he was insulting the whole United States army——"

"Hurrah!" cried Will irrepressibly, jumping to his feet. "Now you're talking, Betty. How about it, fellows? Shall we do as she says?"

"You bet we will!" they cried, and at the ring in their voices, even Betty's ardent little heart was satisfied.

CHAPTER VII

A LARK IN THE OPEN

"WELL, where do we go from here, boys?" asked Allen, lazily stretching out on the grass with a convenient, raised bank of moss for a pillow, while the girls repacked the depleted hampers. "It's such a wonderful day, and camp was never like this."

"Tell us something we don't know," Frank retorted. "Gee, it's been a fine experience and all, but, believe me, I'll be glad when the call comes for action."

"They're off again," said Grace plaintively.

"I must say you're not awfully complimentary," added Mollie, busily folding napkins.

"In what way, sweet maid, do we offend?" Will inquired.

"Oh, always talking about how glad you'll be to get away from us," she explained. "Here we thought we'd been entertaining you so beautifully——"

"Gee, you have!" cried Roy, propping himself

on his elbow and speaking with unaccustomed solemnity. "It's been just great, having you girls here."

"It certainly has," added Frank. "I guess we'd have gone clean crazy because of homesickness if you hadn't come along just when you did."

"Now you're saying something," added Allen warmly, while the girls stopped packing and looked on happily. "Do you remember what we were talking about that day when we almost——"

"Ran into what we were talking about?" finished Frank with a grin. "You bet I do."

"Well, what was it?" drawled Grace, after they had waited patiently for the boys to continue and the latter had smiled aggravatingly to themselves over their thoughts.

"If it's bad," added Mollie briskly, "we don't want to hear it, for, as the old lady said that used to come to see Mother regularly once a year, 'I don't care what terrible things people say or think about me, if they don't tell me about it.' But if it's good—we might stand it."

"Oh, it was good all right," Frank assured her, still smiling over his thoughts. "We were saying that if we didn't get a furlough so we could go back to Deepdale——"

"For a certain purpose," suggested Will.

"For a certain purpose," Frank repeated sol-

emnly—"we were afraid we might have to desert."

"Yes, that would have been sensible," scoffed Mollie. "Get half a dozen years in prison for yourselves and I'd like to know where your furloughs would be then."

"And you haven't really told us a single nice thing about ourselves," added Betty plaintively. "All the time we've just been holding our breath to listen——"

"We've been doing our best to tell you those nice things, every minute of every day since then," said Allen in a low voice. "If you haven't heard, it's because you wouldn't listen."

Betty colored adorably—to quote Allen again—and resumed her packing with great fervor.

"All of which," Frank finished his self-justification, "shows that we're far from anxious to leave you girls when we say we're eager for action. I guess," he added, thoughtfully, "it's just because we're so crazy to be with you that we're eager to go across."

"That sounds rather——" began Grace, but Frank would not let her finish.

"I know it does," he admitted. "Sounds like a contradiction. But I think you know what I'm trying to get at, just the same."

"Why, sure," Will backed him up eagerly.

"Frank means that we've got a confounded, disagreeable job to do before we can settle down and be happy on good old United States soil again——"

"And the sooner we get it done, the better," finished Roy.

Allen nodded.

"I guess that's about the size of it," he said. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we'll be coming home again. And, say, fellows, what a home coming!"

At the wistfulness in his voice the girls felt the tears rise to their eyes, and to save them from a breakdown Betty crisply changed the subject.

"I hope you boys can get over to the Hostess House Thursday night to see the entertainment we are helping get up among those new fellows who came week before last," she cried.

"Working yourselves to death over it, are you?" inquired Allen.

"Never!" returned Grace, with sudden emphasis.

"But it's lots of fun," chuckled Mollie. "We have found out by judicious inquiry—Amy, here, soon worms out the heart secrets of these boys by her quiet, sympathetic way—that a number of those boys have parlor tricks of one sort or another, and——"

"That orchestra fellow really is good," interrupted Amy. "Boys, you should hear him play! He has a guitar hung over his shoulder, a harmonica strapped to his head, a piano near by to which he makes sudden dashes, and all the while he dances the most marvelous dance!"

For once Amy was aroused to enthusiasm. The boys, however, were less interested, and Roy wanted to know what the girls themselves had to do in the coming entertainment.

"Oh," laughed Betty, "we are stage managers, scenic artists, stage hands, costumers, modern imitation of the Greek chorus, stays and props for the weak and timid, brakes for the overbold —in fact, we are around to do any work that nobody else wants to do.

"But we haven't decided," she reminded them suddenly, "just how we're going to spend the rest of the afternoon. Of course we can always take a walk——"

"Not after that lunch," declared Allen, striving to sit up, and sinking down again with a moan. "I'm ten pounds heavier than when I came."

"Well, you ought to be ashamed to admit it," retorted Mollie. "I thought in the army you had to be able to hike fifteen miles without winking."

"Sure. But this is our day off," objected Roy. "What do you suppose we get leave for—just

to do what we can do every day of our lives?"

"Well, then, for goodness sake, suggest something," cried Mollie impatiently.

"I have an idea," cried Allen, so suddenly that they all started.

"Well, you needn't be so proud of it."

"Do you remember that pond we came across the day we went prospecting alone, Frank?" he continued, not noticing the interruption.

"Yes," Frank answered, catching the idea and looking interested. "Seems to me it ought to be somewhere in this neighborhood. Going to catch some fish?"

"Why, of course," put in Roy scornfully. "We're so attractive all we have to do is to whistle to the little animals to have them squabbling for the best place on the hook."

"My, isn't he the sarcastic boy," grinned Allen. "That little trick might work with you, Roy, but we're more modest."

"Well, have you got any fishing tackle?" queried Roy patiently.

"Sure," it was Frank's turn to be sarcastic. "Don't you know that's a part of every doughboy's outfit—so he can go fishing for the Huns?"

"Peace, peace, my children," entreated Betty plaintively. "Can't we ever talk about anything without getting into an argument?"

"But this isn't an argument; it's a suggestion," said Allen. "Though I expect the scorn and ridicule of an unthinking populace. Perhaps you have heard of the old-fashioned, but sometimes effective, string and bent pin?"

The boys shouted, and Allen bent upon them a pitying glance.

"It is even as I expected," he said sorrowfully. "Well, I have done my best——"

"I say old man," Roy interrupted suddenly, proving an unexpected ally, "I'm for you. Of course we won't get anything, but it will be an adventure. And gee, some fresh fish would taste good!"

So they went to work, eager as children on a lark. The girls managed to furnish enough pins for the hooks, and when the available string gave out, the boys made use of stout, withy vines as substitutes.

And, strange as it may seem, they actually were successful. The little stream proved to be full to overflowing with fish, small to be sure, but still eatable.

"Gee, I never saw anything like it!" cried Roy as he excitedly pulled out one fish after another. "They seem to be eager to be caught. And to think that we actually scoffed at the idea."

"That's what genius always has to bear," put

in Allen, resignedly, while Betty gave him a sidewise glance from under her long lashes.

"Oh, don't we hate ourself," she chided softly, as she handed him more bait. "You really shouldn't, Allen——"

"What! Hate myself?" he demanded, letting a fish slip back into the water in his preoccupation. "I'd just as soon—as long as you don't!"

Betty laughed happily. It was so good to be there, unbelievably catching fish, with Allen beside her saying delightful—and foolish—things.

Then she thought of the parting that must inevitably come and her bright face clouded. Allen saw the shadow and leaned toward her anxiously.

"What is it, dear?" he whispered softly. "Have I done anything?"

"No," she answered with a little smile, half-whimsical, half-wistful. "You haven't done anything. It's what you're going to do that hurts."

CHAPTER VIII

ENTER SERGEANT MULLINS

"MOLLIE, you've been crying."

"I have not!" snapped Mollie, turning so the light would not fall on her face.

"Well, what are your eyes and nose all red for then?" asked Amy reasonably.

"Ask them," retorted Mollie. "Probably just did it to make me mad."

Several days had gone by, and the entertainment into which the girls had thrown themselves with so much enthusiasm had been given and pronounced a great success by the soldiers stationed at Camp Liberty. Since then the days had been given largely to the routine work of the Hostess House—afternoon teas, evening coffee served to those who wished it, writing letters for the boys, entertaining others, looking after wives and mothers and sisters who were visiting near the camp, suggesting books for some who seemed to be of uncertain taste. Now, on this day, something unusual had plainly happened.

"Oh, girls, I've got a wonderful plan—something new for the soldier boys!" cried Betty, breaking in upon her two friends merrily. Then, seeing that she had interrupted something, paused and looked uncertainly from Amy to Mollie and back again.

"Why, Mollie," she cried anxiously, "what is the matter?"

"Oh, can't you find something original to say?" snapped Mollie irascibly. "Seems to me that's all I hear from morning to night. 'Oh, Mollie, what's the matter—what's the matter, Mollie?' till I could scream."

"Oh, please excuse me," said Betty, with a little freezing quality in her voice. "I thought I might help; but if that's the way you feel about it——"

Quick as a flash Mollie had run to her and, repentant, thrown her arms about the Little Captain's neck.

"Please forgive me, Betty," she cried. "I'm perfectly horrid, and I know I don't deserve a friend like you. But—well, I'm just a beast, that's all," she finished lamely.

Betty laughed and patted her shoulder comfortingly.

"I guess we all are once in a while," she said, adding with a return of her old cheeriness, "Now,

prove your repentance by 'fessing up. It's sure to make you feel better."

"Well, it wasn't anything much," Mollie replied, her face clouding again. "Only—I had a quarrel with—with—somebody——"

"How very explicit," drawled Grace, who had entered the room in time to hear the last part of the sentence.

Mollie stiffened, and Betty sent Grace a warning glance.

"Go on, Mollie dear, I'm awfully interested," Betty hurriedly interposed. "Because, you see," she added ruefully, "I just had a quarrel myself."

"You did," cried the three at once, and crowded around her eagerly.

"Oh, Betty, who with?" asked Amy, too excited to bother about grammar. Betty quarreled so seldom with anybody that when she did the girls considered it an event.

"I'll tell you about it after Mollie has 'fessed up," evaded Betty, seeming a trifle sorry for her confidence.

"Oh, did Mollie have one, too?" cried Grace delightedly, while Mollie sent her a hostile glance.

"Well, you needn't be so glad about it," she retorted glumly. "Maybe it wouldn't seem quite so interesting if it were you and Roy."

"Well, how do you know it wasn't?"

The three girls stared.

"What was that you said?" demanded Betty weakly. "I don't think I quite——"

"I said," returned Grace calmly, and pronouncing each word with exaggerated distinctness, "that Roy and I have had a quarrel, which probably would make yours look like nothing at all."

"Grace!" they cried in chorus, "do you mean it?"

For answer Grace turned to the mirror and began to arrange her hair.

"Ask Roy," she flung at them over her shoulder.

Behind her the girls looked at each other dumbly, struggling with a wild desire to laugh and cry at the same instant.

"But how?" Amy was beginning dazedly when once more Betty came to the rescue.

"All this would be funny if it weren't so impossible," she said. "Suppose we begin at the beginning and tell our experiences, since we're all in the same boat. It ought to be interesting—if not instructive."

Grace turned from the mirror and seated herself expectantly on the arm of a chair.

"Well, who's first?" she demanded.

"I am," volunteered Mollie unexpectedly, her

eyes glittering. "It was all so utterly absurd, and it made me so m-mad that I had to c-cry——"

"So we see," murmured Grace impatiently, but once more Betty sent her a warning glance.

"And then——" she suggested.

"Well, Frank and I were taking a little walk when all of a sudden I happened to think of the bayonet drill Sergeant Mullins had invited us to."

Betty and Grace started and leaned forward eagerly in their chairs.

"Yes?" they breathed.

"Well," continued Mollie, her color rising, "I don't know whatever got into Frank—he never used to be like that. He just sort of froze up and wouldn't answer my questions or anything until I got so angry I told him that if he didn't tell me what the matter was I'd say good-by to him right there and wouldn't ever speak to him again."

"Yes?" breathed the girls again.

"Then what did he say?" asked Grace.

"Why, he just got red in the face," replied Mollie, "and said all right then, he'd tell me what the matter was. And then he said"—she laughed a little hysterically—"that he just couldn't stand the thought of my seeing so much of Sergeant Mullins—think of it—me, who have never said two words alone to the man in my life!"

"Well, I never!" Betty exploded, while the usually placid Grace seemed hardly able to keep her seat. "That's almost exactly what Allen said!"

"And Roy, too!" cried Grace dazedly. "Girls, what does it mean?"

"It seems to mean," put in Amy dryly, "that one or all of us are ready for the insane asylum."

"Allen said," Betty contributed, wide-eyed, "that it made him mad to see the way that Sergeant Mullins hung around the Hostess House all the time. He made it quite plain that there was no doubt but what I was the main attraction."

"And Roy thinks it's me," said Grace, her own grammar suffering from excitement. "Goodness! does he think the poor boy is after all of us?"

"Thinks he's going to start a harem, maybe," cried Mollie hysterically. "Oh, dear, isn't it too ridiculous?"

"I suppose," said Amy thoughtfully, "it's because Sergeant Mullins is so awfully good-looking."

"And, of course, he does come around a good deal," added Mollie.

"I know. But that's because he's so lonesome," put in Betty. "And, of course, we have all tried to be nice to him. I think it's horrid,"

she added, flaring up, "for the boys to act so ridiculously just because he happens to be good-looking and awfully attractive!"

"Oh, Betty, Betty," chided Mollie, wiping a tear—this time of merriment—from her eyes. "If Allen could only hear you now!"

"Nonsense!" retorted Betty, almost snappishly. "There are dozens of boys who come here to tell us their troubles, and I don't see why they have to——"

"Pick on him," finished Grace. "Only you must remember," she added with a twinkle, "that he is much more attractive than most——"

"And he never tells us any troubles either," added Mollie, with a chuckle. "Maybe the boys think that's suspicious."

"Well," said Amy, with a sigh, "I seem to be the only one left out. Nobody thinks it's worth while to quarrel romantically about me."

The girls laughed, and Grace added with a grimace:

"Goodness, you needn't feel bad about it. It was just your luck that you didn't meet Will this morning and tell him the awful news, that's all. I suppose he'd have acted as silly as the rest of them."

"Maybe it's a plant anyway," suggested Mollie dolefully.

"A plant?" queried Betty. "What kind—a flower or a T. N. T. factory?"

"A plot was what I meant," explained Mollie patiently, while the others chuckled.

"A plot!" repeated Grace, with a return of her drawl. "Heavens, Mollie, if there is anything in signs you ought to be a great author some day from the way you're always seeing a plot in everything."

"Thank you, I hope so," said Mollie.

"Well, for goodness' sake get to the point," urged Grace impatiently, glancing at the clock. "We'll have to dress pretty soon, to go down to serve the regular afternoon tea to the soldier boys and their friends."

"Oh, it just occurred to me," Mollie explained, "that perhaps the boys had met some girls in town they liked better than they like us and had gotten up a conspiracy—to—to—quarrel with us——"

"What a brilliant idea!" scoffed Grace. "Especially as the boys have been following us around like Mary's little lamb, and have scared all the other boys away."

"And without being conceited at all," added Amy, with a chuckle, "the girls I've seen around the town really aren't calculated to steal their hearts away."

"In that case, haven't we still got Sergeant Mullins?" chuckled Betty.

They laughed, and Mollie added, as they started to dress for the afternoon:

"I wonder if the boys really expected that we wouldn't go to this special bayonet drill to-morrow—especially when we've been longing to see one for ages—just because Sergant Mullins invited us?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Betty carelessly. "But it really doesn't matter since we're going anyway!"

CHAPTER IX

THE BAYONET DRILL

It was a beautiful sunshiny day, and the girls felt their spirits soaring happily as they ran down the steps of the Hostess House and started across the parade.

Also the, what appeared to them, foolish objections of the boys to their attending the bayonet drill lent spice to the adventure, and they hurried on gaily over the parade.

Sergeant Mullins, who had unwittingly caused all the excitement, was, as the girls had said, a tall, splendidly built fellow, good looking to an unusual degree, but very silent and reserved.

He had seemed immensely attracted from the first by the girls from the Hostess House, and had made overtures in a half-shy, half-humorous manner that the girls themselves had found very attractive.

But to them he had been only one of many interesting soldier boys who had come and gone and whose meetings and partings with dear ones

they had watched with swelling throats and tears in their own eyes.

But Sergeant Mullins was an expert with the bayonet and had been attached to Camp Liberty for the purpose of giving the boys special drills in that work.

He had proved so wonderfully successful that, much to his secret chagrin—for Sergeant Mullins, like all the rest of our brave boys, had dreamed of the great things he would do "over there"—the Government had decided to keep him at Camp Liberty indefinitely.

Then, one day, he had invited the girls, in return for the many little kindnesses they had done him, to attend one of his special, exhibition drills.

They had accepted eagerly, little dreaming of the storm their acceptance would evoke. And it is very doubtful whether, even if they had known, it would have made any difference, for they had long desired just this thing and knew that in years to come they would look back upon it as one of the biggest experiences in their lives.

"What time is it, Amy?" Betty inquired a little anxiously. "I'm afraid we stopped to talk too long to those women who came out to see their nephew, and I don't want to be late."

"We have just a minute to spare," returned Amy, and they quickened their pace.

"Wouldn't it be fun," said Mollie, her eyes sparkling, "if we could only meet the boys? I'd just like to pay them back for being so silly!"

"Maybe they'll be in the drill," drawled Grace hopefully.

"That would be adding insult to injury," Betty chuckled. "Then they never would forgive us."

"I just hate jealous people, anyway," added Grace, diving into her pocket and bringing forth a luscious bonbon which Mollie eyed covetously. "I think it's so ridiculous and narrow, don't you?"

"I think it's a good deal more ridiculous and narrow," grumbled Mollie, still hungrily eyeing the rapidly disappearing chocolate, "to keep all the candies to yourself."

"Oh, goodness! Take one," returned Grace, offering a capacious pocket. "I didn't know you were such a shy and shrinking little violet, Mollie. You usually are perfectly capable of helping yourself."

"Well, not out of your fuzzy old pocket," Mollie retorted ungraciously. "Why didn't you bring the box along?"

Grace eyed her pityingly.

"Wouldn't I look nice," she demanded, "lugging a candy box along to a bayonet drill?"

"I think you'd probably be exceedingly popu-

lar," Betty broke in, with a chuckle. "You'd have all the boys around you in earnest."

"And then what would Roy say?" teased Amy. "He'd never speak to poor Grace again."

"Poor Grace, indeed!" sniffed the owner of the name scornfully. "I'd just like to have anybody try to 'poor Grace' me! He'd never do it a second time."

"Goodness, don't look so ferocious, Gracie," Mollie soothed her. "Some one give her another candy—do."

"I'm not a cripple," Grace retorted, evidently in a belligerent mood. "I've always been quite able to help myself."

"So we've noticed," murmured Mollie irrepressibly.

"Will you two please listen to reason?" queried Betty, in her primmest tones.

"Yes, grandma," replied Mollie soberly—which was so ridiculous that even Betty dimpled. "What have we done now?"

"Nothing. It's what you may do," Betty answered, adding, in an explanatory tone: "You see, we are just about to enter the sacred precincts of the drill ground, and it is fitting that we do so with an air of propriety and sobriety."

"Goodness, is she insulting us?" cried Mollie, in mock indignation. "I'll have you know, Miss

Nelson, that I, for one, am not intoxicated and, what is more, never expect to be."

"Goodness! that is a relief," sighed Grace, who had been hanging breathlessly on her words. "I thought you were going to say 'I am not drunk, but soon shall be,' or words to that effect——"

"But will you listen?" cried Betty despairingly. "I've got about as much chance of saying anything sensible——"

"As the man in the moon," finished Grace innocently, then, meeting Betty's outraged eye, added hastily: "Oh, wasn't that what you were going to say?"

"No, it wasn't," Betty was beginning, when Mollie, for the first time in her life played the part of peacemaker.

"Go ahead, honey," she interrupted soothingly. "We're all ears."

"Speak for yourself," Grace murmured.

But this time Betty would not yield, and insisted upon being heard.

"Please listen a minute, girls," she begged. "You know we've got a reputation, deserved or not, of being respectable——"

"Oh, what a mistake," interpolated Mollie.

"I said it might be a mistake," Betty continued patiently, although her eyes twinkled. "Anyway, we've got to live up to it—Goodness! just

look at the boys. I guess the whole camp must be in the drill."

"Yes, I guess Sergeant Mullins was right when he said it was to be an exhibition drill," agreed Mollie, all fun temporarily swallowed up in a very real admiration of the spectacle before them.

"It's no wonder that Sergeant Mullins is considered a very important personage around here," added Amy.

"Oh, look!" cried Grace, as they sat down upon a convenient bench. "They've started. Oh, girls, I'm glad I came!"

Mutely the girls echoed the sentiment, and for the next hour they sat motionless, eyes and attention glued upon the magnificent spectacle of a thousand men, running, advancing, retreating, attacking, all in obedience to one great plan.

They forgot it was only a sham attack, an imitation battle, an exhibition drill. For the moment a curtain had been lifted and they were permitted to see something of the glory, the passion, the horror of democracy's struggle against the armed autocracy of the world.

When it was over they sighed and came back to the present almost with a shock, so greatly had they been engrossed in the scene.

"Well, Sergeant Mullins may not be much of a

talker," were Mollie's first words as they rose to go back, "but he certainly knows how to act!"

"It was wonderful!" breathed Betty, her eyes gleaming. "Just think what it must be to be a man in these times! To be able to fight for one's country!"

"Well, I don't know," said Amy, with a little shudder. "That part of it's all right. But when it comes to being maimed and crippled for life it isn't so much fun."

"Oh, Amy, don't!" cried Grace, clapping her hands to her ears, while Betty continued spiritedly:

"I didn't say it was fun," she cried. "Naturally the boys have to take into consideration the possibility of all that you said, Amy. But there's no glory in the world like giving yourself for a great cause——"

"Hear, hear!" came a masculine voice in applause, and they turned to find Allen and Frank close behind them.

"Well, what will you have?" asked Mollie, eyeing them hostilely. "We thought you were lost and gone forever like Clementine——"

"And were quite reconciled," finished Betty primly, her eyes twinkling.

"Oh, you did. did you?" cried Frank, regarding Mollie's haughtily tip-tilt little nose with

mingled fear and admiration. "Well, I'll have you know, young lady, that you can't get rid of us as easily as all that. May I be permitted to walk beside you, mam'selle?"

Mollie sighed and permitted the liberty with an air of great resignation.

In the meanwhile, Allen was whispering into Betty's almost reluctant little ear.

"Did you really mean what you said about its being glorious to give yourself for a great cause?" he asked softly.

"Why, I—g-guess so," she stammered, taken off her guard. "Why?"

"Oh, just because," he answered vaguely, watching the elusive little dimple at the corner of her mouth, "I might want to remind you of it—some day."

CHAPTER X

ALARMING SYMPTOMS

THE girls awoke one morning several days later—days of routine duty at the Hostess House—with the delightful sensation of something good impending. Crowded as they were in the one big room for Mrs. Sanderson's accommodation, they had formed the habit of talking over their prospective fun before the actual work and hurry and bustle of the day began.

So it was this morning, just after the sun had streamed in through the two big east windows and settled on the tip of Betty's upturned little nose in a most provocative manner.

Sleepily she rubbed a hand across her face, then sneezed.

"Goodness, she's got the 'flu'!" cried Grace in alarm, as she sat up in bed, jerking the covers from her now fully aroused bedfellow. "Amy! Mollie! Get me a gas mask, somebody!"

"I think it's poor Betty that needs the gas mask," retorted Mollie dryly. "I never heard

you talk so much this early in the morning since the first day of our acquaintance, Grace. What happened to wake you up?"

Whereupon Betty sneezed again, and Grace jumped about a foot in the bed.

"Please take her away, somebody," she wailed plaintively, while Betty regarded her out of wide and sleep-brilliant eyes. "I heard a doctor say the other day that at the second sneeze it was time to go to the hospital."

"Well, run along," twinkled Betty, adding, with a speculative look: "If you'll wait just about two minutes, I think I can give you another one."

But Grace waited to hear no more. With a bound she was out of the bed and half-way across the room.

"Goodness!" remarked quiet Amy, with a laugh, "I should think it would be almost worth while having the 'flu,' Betty, just to see Gracie move like that."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Betty, rubbing the offending little nose ruefully. "It's easy to talk when it's some one else who's got it. Nobody seems to have any sympathy for me at all."

"We would, dear," cried Mollie, slipping out of her own bed and taking Grace's place beside

Betty on the sun-flooded cot, "only you don't really look as though you were dying of anything, you know—especially influenza. Betty dear," she added, with an impulsive little hug, "you do look so pretty!"

"Now she does want a quarter," remarked Grace skeptically, as she took the place Mollie had vacated. "Don't you believe her, Betty Nelson. It's too early in the morning to see straight anyway."

Betty laughed delightedly.

"How very complimentary," she said, with a droll twist to the corner of her mouth. "Never mind, Mollie, it's worth a quarter just for seeing crooked!"

Mollie hugged her, and even Grace had to laugh.

"Which reminds me," continued Betty, apropos of nothing at all, "that we have a whole holiday which we can spend just exactly as we please."

"Yes, where shall we go?" cried Amy eagerly. "I thought maybe we could take Mollie's car and —and——"

Three pairs of curious eyes were focused upon her as she hesitated.

"And what?" they queried in chorus.

"Well, I thought," continued Amy, a little shy, as she always was when about to suggest some-

thing for another's comfort, "I thought we might invite Mrs. Sanderson to go along."

"Good for you, Amy dear," cried Betty eagerly. "That's just exactly what I was thinking. The dear old lady seemed so much better yesterday I thought we might persuade her to share our picnic with us. How about it, Mollie?"

"Why, of course," answered the latter heartily, "I'd love to have her—if she'd come."

"If she'd come?" repeated Amy, puzzled. "Why shouldn't she come—that is, if she's feeling strong enough?"

"Well," explained Mollie, with a little smile as she recalled one of the many unusual conversations she had had with the little old woman, "she told me the other day that she 'hated them gasoline wagons worse than poison,'—that the only reason she rode in ours was because she was unconscious when we put her in and she couldn't help herself. And she added somebody'd have to run over her again to make her do it a second time."

Betty laughed gayly as she flung back the covers and slipped out of bed.

"Goodness, I don't wonder you were doubtful," she said. "Maybe she's changed her mind by this time. Anyway, we can ask her and see."

"I think she's the most wonderful old person

I ever saw," remarked Amy thoughtfully, as they dressed hastily. "She must be pretty old, and yet she says the funniest, wittiest things, and her eyes sparkle and twinkle like a girl's."

"Well, I really think she looks older than she really is," said Grace slowly and very judicially. "You know working on a farm in the hot sun the way she did for years, isn't calculated to make a person look younger than she is."

"Oh, and if we could only do something to find him for her!" sighed Amy for—the girls did not know whether it was the fiftieth or the hundredth time, they had given up counting.

"Well, wishing won't accomplish anything," said Mollie practically, as she vigorously pulled on a shoe as if it were in some mysterious way responsible for the unsatisfactory state of affairs. "I think some one ought to nickname us the 'four Dianas.'"

"Well, of course Diana was very beautiful," said Grace, complacently regarding her own pretty reflection in the mirror. "But if you meant that, Mollie, of course the description applies to only one of us."

"Goose," remarked Mollie. "Of course I wasn't thinking of Diana's beauty. I was merely thinking of her in the rôle of a fair huntress."

"Goodness, now she is insulting us!" cried

Betty, turning upon her friend with a melodramatic frown. "Do you mean to imply that one or all of us are huntresses?"

"Not of men," said Mollie scathingly. "That shows a guilty conscience, Betty. I'm surprised at you."

"O-oh! Squelched!" said Betty meekly. "May I ask," she added very humbly, "just what you did mean?"

"I simply meant," explained Mollie patiently, "that we were after two men——"

"Oh!" cried Amy, turning upon her in horror. "And you just told Betty you didn't mean that!"

"I didn't," cried the badgered Mollie in desperation, then turned away in disgust. "There's no use trying to tell you anything," she said.

"Go ahead, Mollie dear," urged Betty.

"I meant," Mollie continued slightly, but only slightly, mollified, "that we were hunting two men—Mrs. Sanderson's Willie and the motorcyclist who ran her down. And we haven't any more real chance of finding them than——"

"A celluloid dog has chasing an asbestos cat in——" began Grace.

"That will do," cried Betty primly, though her eyes danced. "After this, you will kindly answer when you are spoken to, Miss Ford, and at no other time."

"Oh, is that so?" mocked Grace. "Well, I'll just tell you, Miss Nelson, that although I am extremely fond of you—mistaken as that may be—I will take no dictation from you or any one else."

"I'll give you more than dictation, if you don't stop maundering," threatened Mollie. "A girl has about as much chance of saying anything sensible——"

"Did you ever try?" queried Grace innocently, and Betty and Amy had to form a human barrier between the two enemies.

"Goodness, please don't kill her, Mollie," begged the Little Captain, her eyes twinkling. "Not till after breakfast, anyway. I want to give you a chance to think it over."

"Yes, they're punishing murderers terribly," added Amy. "I heard Major Adams say——"

"All right," Mollie agreed, "I'll let her off until after breakfast, but for one reason and one only——"

"And that?" they queried breathlessly.

"I'll be stronger then!" she said.

CHAPTER XI

POLITE KIDNAPPERS

But it seems that breakfast "hath charms to sooth the savage breast," for after Mollie had attacked and conquered the appetizing fruit and cereal, ham and eggs, she seemed to forget all about her dire threat and smiled amiably at her intended victim across the table.

"How long will it take you to get ready, Grace?" she inquired. "Can you do it while Betty and I go around to the garage and back out the car?"

"Let Amy help you with the car this time," Betty objected before Grace could reply. "I want to ask Mrs. Sanderson to go with us."

Mollie clapped her hand over her mouth in a gesture of dismay.

"Goodness," she reproached herself, "I almost forgot about her. Yes, go ahead Betty and do your best to get her. I know it would do her good. But you had better take Amy with you to help persuade Mrs. Sanderson. Amy and you

together are a pair that will be hard to refuse. There goes Mr. Bretton now! He's so grateful for what we girls have done for him here—as though it were anything at all—that he'd do far more than help get the car ready. I'll get his help, while you and Amy go for Mrs. Sanderson and Grace gets ready. Now, rush! hurry! fly! off with you!"

Mollie ran out of the house and after the young soldier whose help she sought. Grace went to her room for some last-minute dressing, and Amy and Betty went upstairs to importune Mrs. Sanderson.

"Well, good morning, my dears," said the old woman, delighted at sight of their bright faces. "I declare, if you don't bring all the sunshine in with you! It is lovely of you to call on an old woman so early in the morning."

"Well, you see," said Betty, eagerly diving right into the middle of her subject. "We've come to kidnap you. Please, won't you let us?"

"Kidnap me," repeated the old lady, patting the soft cheek with a puzzled air. "Why, it seems to me sort of unusual to ask a body if you can kidnap 'em."

Betty laughed.

"Well, I guess maybe it is," she admitted gayly. "But, you see, we can't very well do it without asking you. Mollie said," she added, taking the

little lady's hand in hers and squeezing it affectionately, "that you told her the only way we could get you to do it was to make you unconscious again. And," she finished, with an adorable little coaxing smile, "we couldn't do that, you know. We're altogether too fond of you."

Mrs. Sanderson laughed and pinched her cheek.

"Very well, honey," she chuckled. "Now if you'll tell me what it's all about——"

"We want you to go on a picnic with us," broke in Amy.

"A picnic!" repeated the old lady, more puzzled than before. "What sort of picnic?"

"An automobile picnic," explained Betty, adding quickly as she saw refusal in the bright old eyes. "Oh, please don't say 'no' yet. We've got the whole day off, and we're going to take Mollie's car and go off all by ourselves and eat our lunch and admire the view and——"

"Taste gasoline for a week after," finished the old lady with a little grimace. Then she added quickly, as she saw the hurt look in Betty's bright face: "No, I didn't exactly mean that, dear, and I wouldn't say anything to make you feel bad for worlds, that I wouldn't, only—I jest can't bring myself to ride in those automobiles. You see," there was an almost pathetic appeal for under-

standing in the bright old eyes, "I guess I'm maybe too old to change my ways, an' I get tired easy——"

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Amy intervened with rare tact. "Some day when we're going for just a little ride around the block we'll ask you again. Maybe you'll feel more like it then, and you can get used to it by degrees."

"That's awfully nice of you, dearie," said the old woman, looking gratefully from one bright face to the other. "I suppose you don't know how much I appreciate all you've done for me," she added, her voice breaking a little, "'cause I never could tell you if I lived for a hundred years. But you just sort o' revived my faith in human nature. Since my boy went away——" The old voice broke down entirely then, and Betty continued patting her hand soothingly.

"But there," she added, in a different tone, wiping her eyes determinedly and smiling at them, "this ain't no kind of a mornin' for tears, an' I know my son Willie would be the first one to tell me so.

"Thank you jest as much for askin' me, dearies, and maybe some other time I'll get my courage up to it. But now you jest run along an' enjoy yourselves.

"An' when you come back," she added, taking

both of the soft young hands in her wrinkled one and patting them gently, "you can come up an' tell me all about it."

"Oh, will you let us?" asked Betty eagerly, jumping up and dropping a kiss, light as thistledown, upon the old face. "And we'll bring you flowers, whole bunches of them. Will you promise to be happy while we're gone?"

"Yes, dearie, just happy thinking of your coming back and the flowers," she agreed, and the smile remained on her lips even after the door closed behind them until the sound of their light footsteps and laughter faded away.

Then the brave lips drooped and the gray head went down upon her arms.

"They're such lovely little ladies," she murmured to herself. "An' I will try to be happy. Only—I want my boy, my little son—my baby——"

Meanwhile—

"Isn't she the dearest thing?" asked Amy of Betty as they went into the kitchen to gather up the picnic baskets. "I'm getting so fond of her it will just hurt like everything to have her go away."

"Go away? Oh, Amy!" cried the Little Captain in surprise, facing her as though that possibility had not yet entered her mind.

"Why, yes," repeated Amy, astonished at Betty's amazement. "She's almost well now, and, of course, she's too independent to want to stay here when she's all right again. Why, Betty, what's the matter?"

For Betty had sunk down in one of the kitchen chairs and was regarding her tragically.

"But, Amy, she mustn't go away," she argued weakly, knowing that she really had no argument at all. "Why, I really can't imagine it! I —I never thought——"

"Well, of course, none of us wants her to," Amy admitted, adding reasonably: "But I really don't see how we're going to stop her if she makes up her mind to go. Do you?"

Betty picked up one of the hampers and they walked slowly back through the hall to the front porch.

"Why no, not exactly," she said thoughtfully, then added, with a sudden gleam in her eyes: "Unless—unless——"

"Unless what?" queried Amy breathlessly.

"Oh, I don't know whether you'd call it an idea or just plain foolishness," answered Betty, striving to speak carelessly. "I was just thinking that we might persuade her to stay longer on the plea that we wanted to bring the motorcyclist to justice and needed her identification."

Amy looked a little disappointed.

"Well, I don't know," she said doubtfully. "She said the other day that she didn't care much about bringing the fellow to justice. She said one motorcyclist was as bad as another, and the only thing that would give her satisfaction would be 'to arrest the whole tribe o' them.' "

Betty laughed a little at the characteristic remark, but her eyes were troubled.

"Well," she said with a sigh, "I suppose you're right. She is rather hard to reason with at times. If only I could think of something."

The sharp toot of a horn as Mollie grazed the curb with the huge touring car put an end to the conversation for the time being. Grace was already on the porch, and as they raced down the steps the girls' spirits rose happily.

After all, it was a perfect summer day, the sun shone brilliantly down upon them, the wind caressed their faces, and, above all, they were young.

It was not till they were several miles out upon the shining road that Betty once more thought of Mrs. Sanderson.

"We might," she said thoughtfully, as though speaking to herself, "tell her that we were trying to find her son. That might have some effect upon her."

"Upon whom?" asked Mollie, nearly running the car into a tree by the roadside in an effort to get a glimpse of Betty.

"Oh, Mollie, do be careful," cried Amy plaintively. "I never come out with you but what I expect to be killed."

"I should think you'd be tired expecting by this time," returned Mollie practically. "Now will you please repeat that somewhat meaningless jumble of words, Betty dear? What was it—something about somebody's son having a good effect upon somebody——"

"Well, I hope you feel better, now that you've gotten it out of your system," drawled Grace. "Now, Betty, go on. I'll keep her quiet with chocolates till you've had your say."

"Go on talking all night, will you, Betty dear?" entreated Mollie, speaking thickly because of a mouthful of chocolate. "Home was never——" But here Grace inserted another bonbon so deftly that Mollie choked and almost precipitated another appalling accident.

"For goodness sakes, hurry, Betty!" cried Amy, in dismay. "If you don't, there won't be anything of us left to listen to you."

"Well," said Betty obediently, for she had been so busy with her own thoughts that half the persiflage and gay bantering had passed above

her head, "I was speaking of Mrs. Sanderson and her son. I thought that if we told her we were trying to find her Willie, she might consent to stay on with us a little longer."

"But wouldn't that be rather raising false hopes?" objected Grace. "We haven't very much chance of really making such a promise good, you know."

"Well, but if we tried hard enough we might think of something," Betty insisted. "We might," she added vaguely, "We might—advertise——"

"In what?" queried Amy.

"The papers, of course," Betty answered impatiently.

"Well," said Mollie, chewing down the last bit of chocolate and speaking thoughtfully, "there may be something in your idea, at that, Betty. I don't know about the others, but I'm with you, anyway."

CHAPTER XII

WHERE LOVE IS DEAF

"Doesn't it seem funny," Amy was saying as she daintily but thoroughly gnawed a chicken bone, "not to have the boys with us?"

"Well, I think," returned Mollie, her nose at an independent angle, "that it's mighty nice—for a change."

"Yes," Grace agreed, employing her paper napkin to remedy the damage done by a vivid spot of jelly on her skirt. "They seem to think they can dictate to us. Imagine it! To us! Outdoor girls who have never known what it was to take dictation from any one!"

"Except our Daddies," Betty broke in, her eyes twinkling. "I've seen even you stand at attention, Gracie dear, when Mr. Ford spoke."

"Oh well, of course," said Grace, dismissing the interruption with a wave of her hand. "We've got to obey our parents, till we're twenty-one anyway."

"Then I guess we've got to go on obeying all

the rest of our lives," said Mollie, with a sigh.

They looked at her curiously.

"For who," she went on to explain reasonably, "in her right senses is going to admit to being twenty-one?"

"To finish what I was saying," Grace continued, while Betty and Amy chuckled and Mollie looked wide-eyed and innocent: "I, for one, will never take dictation from any one outside the home folks—especially mere boys our own age."

"Well, no one asked you to," said Mollie calmly. "I really don't see what all the speech-making's about," she added.

"It was about the boys," said Amy, mumbling over her third piece of chicken.

"And by the way they take it for granted we've got to do what they say," finished Grace.

"Well," said Betty, plucking a piece of grass and rolling it thoughtfully between her fingers, "don't you think perhaps they act that way because they're going 'across' so soon?"

"I don't see what that's got to do with it," returned Mollie, puzzled. "I should think that would make them want to be especially nice to us—leave a good impression, you know."

"Just the same I can't help thinking," Betty persisted, "that that was why they acted so queerly about Sergeant Mullins. Maybe they

think that when they're several thousand miles away the other boys will have their chance."

"But that's silly," objected Mollie. "As if we wouldn't think a good deal more of them when they get over there."

"Distance lends enchantment?" queried Grace, with lifted eyebrows.

"Goose," commented Mollie.

"Goodness," cried Grace plaintively, "that's the second time I've been called a goose in the last five minutes. Pretty soon I'll be a whole flock of them!"

The girls laughed, and Mollie said with aggravating condescension:

"It's hard sometimes to tell the truth, Grace dear, but we only do it for your own good. That's what friendship is for, you know."

"Then give me enemies!" cried Grace. "I don't care how many faults I have if people just won't tell me about them."

"Which reminds me of something," said Mollie with a chuckle.

"Well, don't tell us about it," said Grace hastily. "I'm trying hard to love you, Mollie, but I can't stand everything——"

"Oh, but it's a joke on me this time," Mollie reassured her, and Grace sat back with a sigh of relief.

"It happened while we were at Pine Island," Mollie continued with a chuckle. "I was sitting in the living room playing the piano——"

"Or trying to?" interrupted Grace.

"Or trying to," agreed Mollie with perfect good-nature. "You know my repertoire consists of two pieces, and I was humming one of them as I played.

"Frank and Roy were sitting on the steps of the porch outside and I heard Frank say to Roy very earnestly:

" 'Do you know, I think Mollie would have a wonderful voice if she would only have it cultivated.' "

"Goodness, I thought——" began Grace, but the Little Captain very hastily pinched her into silence.

"Evidently they thought I couldn't hear them," Mollie continued. "But they were mistaken, for I heard Roy answer pityingly, 'Say, old man, I've heard of love being blind before, but here's a case where the poor little god is deaf.' "

"Mollie," cried Amy, shocked, while the others laughed merrily, "what did Frank say? Did he stand for that?"

"Most decidedly not," chuckled Mollie. "The last I saw of them, Frank was leaping a fence, hanging on to Roy's coat tails. It was awfully

funny. I think I laughed for an hour afterward."

"It was a wonder there was enough of poor Roy left to come home," giggled Betty. "Frank isn't what you might call gentle, when his temper is roused."

"Oh, I believe I know when that was now!" exclaimed Grace, with sudden animation. "It must have been that evening when I was baking biscuits and I looked out of the window and saw Roy. He looked like a tramp, hair all disheveled and face as red as a beat.

"I called to him and asked him if he'd been in a fight or something, and he just got redder than ever and backed off into the woods.

"I concluded he'd gone suddenly and violently insane, and as the aroma of nearly burned biscuits filled the air I promptly forgot all about him."

Mollie chuckled.

"There was probably a very good reason for his *backing* off," she said. "I shouldn't wonder if after that he kept his meditations to himself."

"Yes," said Grace, with gentle malice, "I've long since concluded that it's better to keep still about personal matters, no matter what you think."

"Well, perhaps you have," said gentle Amy

with sudden spirit: "But I must say I never noticed it."

Grace struck a dramatic attitude.

"And you too, Amy?" she cried. "Ah, this is too much——"

"Yes, it's all right, dear," soothed Betty, hastily rescuing a basket. "But please don't step on the lunch. These baskets cost four dollars and ninety-eight cents at a bargain sale."

"Oh, how sordid of you, Betty," chuckled Mollie. "As if Grace cared for a mere little five-dollar bill."

"Goodness, I don't know whether I do or not," remarked Grace plaintively. "It's so long since I've seen one I can't tell."

"As Allen remarks," laughed Betty, as she gathered up the remains of the lunch, "'money must think you're dead.'"

They laughed at her, and then suddenly Betty changed the subject.

"You know, I overheard something the other day," she said, "that's just made me terribly blue whenever I've let myself think of it."

"Oh, Betty," gasped Mollie, jumping unerringly to the catastrophe they had been dreading all these months, "do you mean the boys have got their orders?"

"Oh, no, I don't actually know a thing," Betty

hastened to assure her, but there was a brilliant light of excitement in her eyes that did not reassure the girls.

"Then what do you mean?" cried Mollie impatiently. "Oh, Betty dear, I just haven't realized how awful it will be until this minute. When those boys have actually gone, I'll lie down and die, that's all."

"Well, for goodness sake, don't tell them that," beseeched Grace. "Then they will think they can dictate."

"Well, let 'em," said Mollie recklessly. "They can, for all I care."

"Go on, Betty, do," urged Amy, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously. "Tell us what it was you heard."

"Well, Major Adams was talking with the colonel," Betty complied, her color bright, "and I just happened to catch a couple of phrases as I passed.

" 'In a week!' the major was saying eagerly. 'The boys will be glad of that, Colonel. I've had all I could do to keep them pacified at all. Once let them get at the Huns and it will be all over but the shouting.'

" 'Yes, they're a fine bunch of young fighters,' the colonel answered. And, oh girls, I wish you could have seen the way he looked, so splendidly

straight and martial and proud. 'I tell you, Major,' he said, 'it's a great thing to have the leadership of such lads as those. They're the pick of the nation.'

"And then I went on and my heart was beating so hard I had to hold on to it," Betty finished. "It seemed to me I could almost hear the cannon and see the boys—our boys——"

Her voice trailed off into silence, and for a long time no one spoke. Each one of these young girls, who, a few short months before, had scarcely known the meaning of the word war except as they had read about it in their histories, was striving desperately to visualize the battle front—the trenches, great guns belching forth a deadly hail of shells, the roar of cannon, the moans of dying men——

And there, perhaps, in the mire and horror of it all—the boys—their boys——

CHAPTER XIII

THE COPPERHEAD

Betty was the first to break the silence.

"But, of course," she said, and they started at the sound of her voice—so far away had their thoughts been wandering, "it may only be one more of those rumors the boys are always talking about."

"I suppose so," said Grace, with a sigh. "Anyway, it won't do any good to worry about it till the time comes."

"Well, I don't know," said Mollie a little irritably. "It's like having a sword hanging over your head all the time. I'd just as soon have it cut me in two now and get it over with."

"Yes, it is something like cutting the poor dog's tail off an inch at a time," sighed Amy, and at the comparison and her sober countenance they had to laugh despite the very real trouble at their hearts.

"I wish," said Betty wistfully after a while, "the boys could have gotten leave to-day. I

should like to have just one more picnic with them. We've had such good times together. And we're going to have lots more," she added, springing to her feet with a sudden, swift smile. "That's our part of the business from now on. Just to keep smiling and make up our minds that they're coming back to us just as they went—only better."

"They couldn't be," declared Amy, and once more the other Outdoor Girls laughed and hugged her.

"Anyway, they've got one good backer in you, Amy dear," said Betty fondly. "You've no idea how fond all the boys are of you. I declare, sometimes I'm almost jealous."

"You," cried Amy incredulously, looking at the flushed face and shining eyes. "You'll never need to be jealous of anybody in your life Betty Nelson—and especially of me,' she added modestly.

Betty laughed and hugged her again.

"Girls, it's getting late," she said suddenly, with another of her swift changes of subject. "I guess perhaps it's time we were starting back. Oh, I forgot," she added, in consternation, "I, or rather, Amy and I, promised Mrs. Sanderson we'd gather some flowers for her, and now we've got to do it, even if it is late——"

"Of course we have," agreed Mollie, rising with alacrity. "It wouldn't do at all to disappoint her."

"It must have been a pretty lonely day for her," said Amy thoughtfully, as she snapped the lid of a basket shut. "I wish she had come with us."

"Well, we're pretty much in the same boat as she is—or will be soon," mused Mollie, as the girls scattered to make good Betty's promise.

"How so?" queried Amy.

"Why," said Mollie, "she's already lost her boy and now we're about to lose ours."

"Goodness, Mollie," cried Grace indignantly, while the others chuckled, "you make me feel eighty years old. They're not our sons, you know."

"Of course you had to tell me that——" Mollie was beginning, when a scream from Amy and a hurried scramble onto a convenient stump interrupted her.

"What is it?" they cried, running to her anxiously.

"Look out, look out," Amy cried, bringing them up with a sharp turn a couple of feet from her perch.

"What is it?" they cried again, looking wildly about them.

"A snake," she screamed. "Look out, Grace, it's coming for you! Oh, look out!"

Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, the girls looked where Amy pointed, and saw, wriggling ominously toward them through the short grass, a large coppery-headed snake.

Grace gave one desperate leap and landed beside Amy on the stump while Betty and Mollie stepped to one side out of the reptile's path. Then, almost miraculously—or so Betty thought when she looked back upon it afterward—her eye fell upon a forked twig lying at her feet.

Quick as light she stooped and picked it up, then turned to Mollie, who was standing backed up against a tree, white-faced, terrified, in a half-hypnotized condition, staring at the snake.

The reptile had coiled itself and lay hissing at them viciously.

"I'm going to hold out this stick," whispered Betty feverishly between lips that scarcely moved, "and when he strikes, pick up that rock at your feet and let him have it. Ready?"

"Y-yes," stammered poor Mollie, terrified, yet game to the last. "Oh, Betty——"

But the sentence was never finished for, with a menacing movement, Betty had thrust the stick toward the reptile and the latter with a hiss had struck.

Quick as a flash and before the snake had time to coil again, Mollie picked up the rock and hurled it at his sinister copper head. Her aim was true, and the long, slithery body, robbed of its deadliness, writhed and beat furiously at the short stubbly grass.

Mollie put her hands before her eyes, shivering, and even Betty leaned weakly against a tree, faint and sick, now that the crisis had passed.

"I—I thought you'd be k-killed," moaned Amy, and though the tears of excitement and horror were rolling down her cheeks, she would have been the first to deny it had you told her she was crying. "Oh, B-Betty, you're w-wonderful!"

"No I'm not—I'm just scared stiff," cried Betty hysterically. "Anyway, M-Mollie did it all."

"Well, let's g-get out of here," cried Grace. Later they had time to laugh at the chattering teeth that made it impossible to say anything without stammering—but it seemed anything but funny to them then. "Let's g-get out!"

"Second the motion," cried Betty, with a wry little twist to her mouth, being, as usual, the first to recover her self control. "I can't see any sense in lingering."

A few seconds later they had gathered up their belongings and jumped thankfully into the road

—out of sight of that sinister body still writhing in the grass.

It was not until they had climbed into the car and were whirling over the smooth road at a rapid rate that they began to feel like themselves again.

"I guess that was one of the narrowest escapes we ever had," said Mollie over her shoulder with a laugh that was still a little unsteady. "I guess we won't go picnicking in the woods alone again for quite some time."

"But I didn't know there were any snakes around here," said Grace wonderingly, and, it must be admitted, still with a little quaver in her voice.

"There aren't many," Betty explained. "Allen told me that poisonous snakes of any sort had been so rarely seen around these parts that people thought the stories of them were made up. He said they always looked suspiciously at the bearers of the snake tales, shrugged their shoulders, winked, and asked each other to guess where So-and-So had been the night before."

"Goodness," cried Mollie. "I suppose we'll never dare to tell it then. They'll think we are——"

"Slightly inebriated," finished Betty drolly.

"Goodness, I don't know what that means,"

objected Mollie, "but it sounds worse than what I was going to say. Now what's the matter?"

This last exclamation was caused by a sudden, grinding noise within the machine and a jerking stop that jarred them all nearly out of their seats.

Mollie looked back over her shoulder with a despairing expression:

"Well, this certainly isn't our lucky day," she said, with forced calm. "First we nearly get eaten up by a snake, and then the car breaks down——"

"But, Mollie, what's the matter?" cried Grace impatiently. "We can't stay here. Can't you see?—there's a storm coming up."

"Well I didn't do it," snapped Mollie. "I do think, Grace, you can be the most unreasonable——"

"Oh, please don't start anything else," cried Betty, herself a little on edge with the rather exciting day's events. "Let's get out and see if we can find what's wrong. We certainly can't do any good by talking about it."

They got out, and Mollie even consented to "get under," but all to no avail. The machine refused to be placated and stood stubbornly still in the middle of the road while the storm clouds gathered and the first drops began to fall.

"Well," Mollie decided at last, sitting miser-

ably on the running board, "I guess we've either got to sit here all night or walk home and trust to luck the car doesn't get stolen."

"Also get soaked through ourselves," Grace was adding disconsolately, when a familiar sound caught their ears. It was the regular tramp, tramp of marching men.

"Some of the boys from the camp!" cried Mollie, springing up joyfully. "Maybe they'll help us."

As the small squad swung around the turn in the road they were delighted to see that Sergeant Mullins was in charge. He brought the boys to a sharp halt at sight of them, and came forward to meet them, saluting gravely.

"Are you in trouble?" he asked, with his quiet smile and a glance at the stalled machine. "May I help?"

"Oh, would you?" cried Betty, her pretty forehead puckered. "We do want to get back before the storm breaks."

Without a word, the young fellow removed his jacket and examined the machine carefully. Then, with equal gravity, he wormed his way under the car.

In what seemed to the girls no more than a minute, he reappeared and smiled at them.

"I guess it's all right now," he assured them

with another punctilious salute. "If I might suggest that there's no time to be lost——" with a significant glance toward the lowering sky. For answer, Mollie threw in the clutch and the machine purred evenly. Then, with a little impulsive gesture, she turned to the sergeant.

"It's—it's a long way to Camp Liberty," she said, with pretty hesitation. "Won't you let us show you how grateful we are by letting us take you there?"

"Please do," urged Betty.

He considered a moment, then with another of his grave smiles saluted once more and turned to the boys who stood waiting in the road.

"Pile in, fellows!" he said. "We'll just about make it before the storm."

Then, while the boys obeyed, scrambling in any way, and Betty and Grace squeezed themselves into the front seat, Sergeant Mullins leaned over and said, very quietly:

"Thank you."

CHAPTER XIV

THE REINS TIGHTEN

"A WEEK!" sighed Betty. "Oh, Mollie dear, a week's such a very little time!"

"Goodness, it isn't even that now," Mollie returned, dropping a stitch in the sweater she was making and not even noticing it—an almost unheard of procedure. "That is," she added, with a slight little flicker of hope, "if you're sure you heard the major aright, Betty. Mightn't he have been speaking of something else?"

"Well, I told you what he said," answered Betty, a trifle impatiently, for she also had dropped a stitch and saw before her the weary process of ripping out two whole rows of her helmet—and helmets were such mean things to make, anyway!

"When he spoke of a week," she added, ripping vindictively, "and then said that the boys would be glad the waiting was over, it seems to me there's just about one conclusion we can come to."

"Oh, all right, but you needn't be so cross about it," returned Mollie, who, being very cross herself, could not make allowance for the malady in any one else.

"Have you seen any of the boys lately?" she asked, after an interval of deep concentration. "We've been kept so busy here at the Hostess House lately with these other boys that our boys might as well be dead and buried for all I've seen of them."

"Who's talking about being dead and buried?" demanded a third voice, and they turned to see Grace in the doorway with the inevitable candy box under her arm.

"Can't you choose a more cheerful subject?" she added, coming in and seating herself luxuriously in a big chair. "There's enough of that being done anyway——"

"You talk as if getting dead and buried were some sort of new indoor sport," interrupted Mollie, glad to have this old familiar enemy to spar with.

"Goodness, there's no more sport in anything," returned Grace, disconsolately. "I don't see why any old swell-headed German——"

"Grace!" exclaimed Betty, but with twinkling eyes. "What language!"

"Oh, I could do lots better than that," re-

turned Grace tranquilly, "if I weren't in polite society."

"You flatter us," murmured Mollie.

"I know it," Grace retorted, still calmly. "Anyway, I was remarking that I didn't see why any swell-headed old German was allowed to take the world by the ears and turn it upside down——"

"Gee, who's allowing him?" cried a masculine voice from the door, and the girls turned with a chorus of greetings to welcome Roy.

"We were just saying we thought you were dead," remarked Mollie somberly, never lifting her eyes from the sweater as he seated himself beside her.

"Sorry to disappoint you," he replied cheerfully. "As Frank remarked unflatteringly this morning, 'You are far from being a dead one—go and reform.' "

"Was he speaking of me?" demanded Mollie Billette in deadly quiet, but Roy raised a placating hand.

"No, no, of course not," he said hurriedly. "He was speaking of me, poor worm that I am. But, I say," he added, looking around at the busily flying needles, "what's the idea of the knitting. We've got more sweaters and things than we know what to do with now."

Mollie lifted her eyes long enough to give him a withering glance.

"Do you think you're the only ones we care about?"

"I hope so," he responded promptly and daringly.

"Do you think maybe we'd better leave, Betty?" inquired Grace with delicately lifted eyebrows, while Mollie flushed scarlet.

"If you do, I'll never speak to you again," cried the latter, in alarm, adding, to change the subject: "Where are the other boys, Roy? You usually travel in fours."

"Well, as long as you didn't say on all fours, it's all right," responded Roy in a weak attempt at a joke that focused three pairs of girlish eyes scornfully upon him.

"Roy!" they chorused.

"All right, don't shoot," he pleaded. "What was that you asked me, Mollie?"

"I asked you," returned Mollie, with deliberation, "where the other boys were."

"I don't know, and what's more I don't care," replied Roy independently, leaning back and crossing his long legs with a sigh of content. "We've all been trying to get leave to come over and see you girls, and so far I'm the only one who's succeeded. The old boy, that is, the

colonel," he corrected himself, gravely saluting the imaginary officer, "is drawing the reins pretty tight these days. Looks," he added, striving to keep the excitement out of his voice, "pretty much like business."

"Like business," they repeated in chorus, and were about to follow it up with a shower of questions when there was the sound of more masculine voices in the hall and the missing members of the quartette precipitated themselves upon the assembled company. Roy looked disgusted—the girls happy.

"So you thought you'd have the field all to yourself, did you?" Allen demanded of the disconsolate Roy. "Well, that's the time you counted your chickens too soon."

Then, turning to Betty, he caught her two hands in his and waltzed her exuberantly about the room.

"Betty, Betty," he cried, his voice keen, his eyes shining with excitement, "we've got special permission to tell you, because you're in the service. We're going, little girl! We're on our way to lick the tar out of those Huns!"

"Allen!" Betty's face went suddenly white and she sank down on the arm of a chair, regarding him with wide, dark eyes. The other three boys with Mollie and Grace were gathered in the

opposite corner of the room, chattering like magpies.

"It's—it's really come?" she demanded, unsteadily. "Oh, Allen, when?"

"Day after to-morrow," he replied, his own hands shaking a little as they closed over hers. "Are you going to congratulate me, Betty?"

"A—of course," she answered, smiling at him with a bravery that made him long to gather her in his arms and comfort her. She looked so little and plucky and utterly adorable.

"Then do it," he said whimsically, putting his hands behind him to keep them out of temptation.

"C-congratulations," she stammered, then her lip trembled and she bit it to keep it steady. "I know how much you've been wanting it," she continued, striving for a matter-of-fact tone, "and so, of c-course, I'm glad for your sake. Only——"

"Only?" he prompted, gripping his hands hard to make them behave.

"Only," she added, her voice scarcely above a whisper, and glancing up at him shyly, "I can't very well help missing you, Allen, just at first——"

"Betty," he cried, his hands breaking away from their imprisonment and seeking hers fiercely, "I'm trying so hard to do the right thing,

—be honorable and all that—wait till I come back, you know—but I can't. It—it isn't human nature. You're too wonderful—too utterly——"

"Allen, don't!" she cried breathlessly. "You forget we're not alone."

"I—don't—care——" he was beginning headily, but she wrenched her hands free, and, eluding him, plunged into the excited group at the other end of the room.

"Hello, Betty," Mollie cried, her voice high with excitement. "I guess you were right after all—only it's five whole days sooner than we expected."

"I—I wish they'd stop the old war," sighed Amy, who had come in in time to share the wonderful news. "I just can't bear the thought of it."

"Gee, that would be a nice note," broke in Will boyishly. "After all these weeks of training, to have the war stop just as we got ready to have a hand in it!"

"We'll be lucky if we don't leave a couple of hands in it," said Roy, again trying to be witty and again finding himself the battery for a score of indignant glances.

"If you think that's funny," Grace was beginning when Betty, color high, heart still beating suffocatingly from that brief little battle with

Allen and her own inclination, interceded in his behalf.

"Oh, do leave him alone," she cried, patting Roy's scorned shoulder soothingly. "I, for one, would forgive him for anything he said or did just now without even being asked."

Roy gave her a grateful glance and Allen whispered close in her ear.

"You can be kind to every one but the one who loves you, Betty. Is that it?"

His voice was so low that no one but Betty could hear. And Betty felt an added rush of color sting her cheeks, and turned her eyes away to hide the confusion, the sudden fright in them.

If they had been alone no one knows what might have happened. But, even as it was, Allen, watching the flaming color and the downcast eyes, felt his heart leap joyfully and was almost—almost—satisfied.

CHAPTER XV

THE FATEFUL DAY

THE rain that had been pouring down steadily all night stopped about dawn. Betty raised herself on one elbow to look out the window and was greeted by a dazzling burst of sunshine, as the glorious disc dispersed the fog and took possession of the world.

"A good omen," she murmured to herself, rubbing the sleepiness from her eyes. "Perhaps that's how the Huns will melt away before our boys!"

"What are you talking to yourself about?" queried Grace, irritably. "A person has a fine chance to sleep——"

"Sleep!" cried Betty, indignantly. "What on earth do you want to sleep for? Do you know what day this is?"

"Friday," Grace answered mechanically, then seeing the point of the question, sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, I—forgot," she stammered. "They're—they're going away, aren't they?"

"Yes; unless, they've changed their minds since last night," returned Betty dryly. "Oh, Grace, please don't look so sleepy. You—you annoy me," she finished hysterically.

"Well, I'm sorry," said Grace, trying comically to appear dignified. "But it really isn't so strange that I should look the way I feel——"

"Goodness, if I looked the way I feel, I'd be an awful mess," sighed Amy from the other bed.

"Maybe you do," chuckled Mollie. "Shall I get you a mirror?"

"Well, if you'd been awake almost all night," Amy began, but Mollie cut her short with a bear's hug.

"Forgive me, Amy," she said, with unusual humility. "I do know how awful it is to lie awake nearly all night and just think.

"And I shouldn't blame any one the least bit," she finished, "for calling me a mess, because I know I am. I'm positively afraid to look in the mirror."

"All right, we'll have 'em all draped in black, just for your special benefit," said Grace dryly. "Mollie, where did you put my stockings?"

"Goodness, what do you think I am?" retorted Mollie. "Your little French maid?"

"Nothing half so cute," returned Grace ungraciously, while Betty and Amy exchanged glances which, interpreted, meant: "We'll have our hands full with these two, to-day, all right."

"Anyway, you didn't answer my question," Grace persisted. "I asked you what you did with my stockings."

"Oh, I've got 'em on," replied Mollie sarcastically, smothering a yawn. "I mislaid my slumber shoes and used them instead."

The girls giggled and Grace looked around for an instrument of punishment. Not finding any, she was forced to resort to sarcasm.

"I guess you must have caught that particular form of insanity from Roy," she said.

"Well, as long as it wasn't the measles——" Mollie was beginning when Amy broke in with one of those absolutely irrelevant remarks of hers, that made her different from every one else.

"I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "if the boys will fall in love with those nice little French girls. They say they're awfully attractive."

"Amy, what ever put such a thing into your head?" cried Betty, while the other two stared at her wide-eyed, not knowing whether to laugh or to be indignant.

"Oh—nothing," she answered vaguely. "I was just wondering, that's all."

"Well," said Mollie, throwing back the covers preparatory to rising, "I might suggest that the next time you feel it coming on, you might choose something more comfortable, that's all. Wondering about such things might become wearing. What's that?" she asked, as a sharp tap sounded on the door.

"A caller, presumably," Grace remarked, as she slipped on a dressing gown and approached the door.

The early morning caller proved to be, much to their surprise and delight, no other than Mrs. Sanderson.

The old lady's eyes were unusually bright, and there was a flush on her face.

"I haven't been able to sleep all night," she said, her hands fluttering nervously in her lap. "Ever since Betty told me the boys were going this morning I couldn't think of anything but just that one thing."

"I am sorry I told you then until this morning," cried Betty, reproaching herself. "I didn't know it was going to make you feel bad."

"Oh, it wasn't your fault, dear," the old woman hastened to reassure her. "And it really didn't make me feel bad—not for them, anyway. They're lucky to be able to fight—even to die—for a country like ours. Only," she paused, and

some of the light died out of her eyes, "I couldn't help wishing——"

"Yes," they prompted gently.

"That my Willie boy could have gone with them," she said, the words so soft that they had to lean close to her to catch them. "I would have been so proud of him."

The girls were silent, not knowing how to comfort the poor old woman.

"Perhaps," said Amy at last, scarcely knowing what she was saying, yet trying so hard to comfort, "he is a soldier somewhere. There are so many thousands of them, you know."

Mrs. Sanderson turned to her with such fierce emotion in her eyes that the girl unconsciously shrank back.

"If I thought that," she said, her voice tense, her hands clasped so tightly in her lap that the knuckles showed white, "I'd be willing, glad, to die the next minute. If I could just see my boy in uniform—even if I knew I could never see him again——" her voice trailed off, and once more the light died out of her eyes.

"But, of course, that's impossible," she said wearily. "If my boy had been alive, he'd have come back to me. But that wasn't why I came in to see you so early," she added after a moment, straightening up with that indomitable courage

that had won, first, the girls' admiration, then their love. "I jest wanted to find out when 'twas the boys was startin'."

"We're not quite sure. The boys thought some time between nine and ten o'clock, but they didn't seem to be at all sure about it. The only thing we really know is that they're going to start early," Betty answered.

"Thank you, dear." The old lady rose, and when she started for the door Mollie ran before her and opened it.

When she had gone, the girls sat still, just looking at each other for a few minutes. Then——

"Isn't she wonderful?" breathed Betty. "After all these years she would give him up gladly for the sake of her country. That's real patriotism."

"She deserves to get him back," murmured Mollie, as though speaking to herself.

"Well, that's just the reason she won't," said Grace, irritably struggling with an unruly lock of hair. "Nobody ever gets what he deserves in this awful world. What is the matter with my hair this morning? It looks just exactly as I feel."

"Oh, come away from the mirror, Gracie," cried Betty, putting an arm about her and dragging her, an unwilling victim, out into the hall. "You'll feel better after you've had your break-

fast. And remember," she added diplomatically, "there's a brand new box of candy in your left-hand dresser drawer."

The ruse worked, and a smile forced its way through Grace's discontent. Then a sudden thought struck her and the smile flickered and went out altogether.

"It was Roy's parting gift," she said, striving to speak lightly, though her voice trembled ever so little. "You know, Betty," she said in a rare burst of confidence, "I never had the slightest idea I could feel so really b-bad——" her eyes filled and she brushed her hand across them impatiently.

"Am I not a goose?" she asked plaintively, and Betty, trying to laugh, choked, too, and abandoned the attempt.

Then they both smiled, an April sort of uncertain smile and went in to breakfast.

"I guess," remarked Betty whimsically, just as Mollie and Amy ran down the stairs and into the room, "that we're fast becoming what you said you were the other day, Gracie—a regular flock of geese!"

CHAPTER XVI

SPARRING FOR TIME

THE roads were muddy from the heavy rain that had fallen over night, but Mollie demurred when the girls suggested that they walk to the station rather than go in the automobile.

"It may be all very well for you," she declared, "but I certainly don't feel in any mood for taking a two-mile walk this morning."

"Well, my knees do feel kind of weak and wobbly," agreed Amy plaintively. "But you know how reckless you are, Mollie, and on these wet roads we're very apt to skid."

"Well, but what's one skid more or less in a good cause?" interrupted Betty merrily. "Besides, I guess we wouldn't have time to walk, anyway," she added quickly, as dozens of soldiers began pouring from their barracks. "We'll never be able to get to the station before the boys unless we take the car."

"Girls, they're really going," wailed Amy, as they quickly got into their wraps.

"Certainly looks like it," said Grace grimly, for once not knowing or caring whether the becoming little hat was tilted at exactly the right angle or not. "It makes me feel all queer and—wobbly inside."

"Better take some candy along," advised Mollie, with a weak attempt at raillery as they ran down the porch steps and piled into the car. "You won't be able to come out of it alive if you're not properly fortified, Gracie."

"Oh, that reminds me," cried Betty, springing from her seat and from the car at the risk of her neck, for the machine had already begun to move. "We forgot the chocolate and tobacco for the boys. Wait for me, Mollie."

But Mollie, who had already brought the car to a standstill with a jerk and a grinding of brakes, leapt out after her, and the two flew up the steps, taking two at a time, and into the house.

Left behind, Amy and Grace looked at each other.

"I wish I could move like that," sighed the latter. "Those two get things done while I'm just beginning to think about it."

"And here they come back again," marveled Amy.

"Yes we have, and it's just about time, too,"

panted Betty, as they scrambled into the machine. "The boys are coming from the main gate now, and we'll have to make things hum if we want to get there before them."

"As Frank would remark," agreed Mollie: "'You said it!' This is going to be the race of a lifetime."

"But Mollie," said Amy, gripping both hands tight in her lap as the car swerved sharply and executed a magnificent skid on two wheels, "you know it won't do either the boys or us any good if we get killed on the way. Do be——"

"Amy Blackford," cried Mollie in an ominous tone of voice, "if you say that word to me again I will run into a tree or something just for spite!"

Amy gave a plaintive little moan, and her two hands gripped tighter in her lap.

"All right," she said. "I'm glad I made my will a couple of days ago."

Grace turned an interested and speculative eye upon her.

"Oh, you did," she remarked, adding in a wheedling tone, "What did you leave me, dear? You know I always was your best friend."

"Goodness, I wonder who's my worst then," retorted Amy, with an unexpected flash of humor.

"Oof, that was a bad one, Gracie," Betty

laughed, glad of any diversion to keep the vision of those splendid, marching boys in the background as long as possible.

Unconsciously the girls were sparring for time. They knew that once they let themselves think, that once they let themselves realize the full significance, the utter finality of this thing that was about to happen, it would be hard for them to smile. And they so wanted to smile!

They had been so glad, so proud when the boys had volunteered among the very first. Down in their hearts they had known that that was the only thing they could have done.

And the thought of their going away had seemed so far in the future that, as yet, it need not worry them. Blinded by their own passionate patriotism, they had seen all of the glory of war and none of its horror.

And now, in order to send the boys away with the thought of bright faces and encouraging smiles to cheer them on their long, grim journey, the girls joked and laughed, carefully avoiding the subject that was uppermost in their minds.

"Oh, well, that's all a person can expect in this world," Grace had answered resignedly, in reply to Amy's thrust. "Just be kind and loving and thoughtful of other people's comfort, and you're sure to be sat upon——"

"Goodness, she doesn't think anything of herself, does she?" Mollie flung back over her shoulder. "Now see what you made me do!" the exclamation was fairly jerked from her as the car lurched into a deep rut at the side of the road, skidded for a minute, seemingly uncertain whether to fling them out on the bank or continue its way, then bumped up on the road again and continued its flight.

"Oh, Mollie, do be——" Amy began, but a sudden grim straightening of Mollie's back warned her in time and with a gasp she choked back the forbidden word.

"Goodness, isn't she well trained?" laughed Betty, as Mollie bent once more over the wheel.

"Who wouldn't be," protested Amy plaintively, "if a cannibal should come and hang an axe over his head——?"

"Is she calling me names?" demanded Mollie ferociously, half turning in her seat. "If she is, please tell her to say it to my face."

"Well, I would if I could," cried poor Amy desperately. "But I'd have to be an acrobat—or an idiot——"

"The last ought to be easy," drawled Grace, then hastily offered her candy. "I didn't mean it, Amy dear," she retracted humbly. "Really I didn't."

"Don't you believe her," said Betty whimsically. "She only wants to find out what you left in your will, Amy."

"I wouldn't dare tell her now, anyway," returned Amy, with a twinkle. "Methinks it might very easily become my death warrant."

"How so?" queried Mollie with interest—or perhaps it might be said, Mollie's back expressed interest. For Mollie's back could express, Grace had once said, "more emotions in a minute than most people's faces could in a year." And, riding as they so often did, in full view of that expressive back, the girls had come to interpret its owner's emotions correctly in nine cases out of ten. So now they were able to detect a very quickened interest.

"Why," Amy explained naïvely, "it's barely possible that I've left something to Mollie, too, isn't it?"

"Barely," agreed Mollie dryly.

"Well," Amy chuckled, "then what would be easier than for Mollie to precipitate an accident, dash my brains out against some convenient tree, and then brazenly protest all innocence in the murder."

"Nothing," said Mollie, with the same dryness of intonation, "except the bare possibility of dashing my own brains out in the transaction."

"Oh, well, it could be fixed," said Amy with confidence.

"Do you really think so?" Mollie's back once more betrayed a lively interest, and the girls chuckled. "Suppose you tell me about it."

"And sign my own death warrant?" returned Amy plaintively. "Goodness, you must think I'm foolisher than I am."

"Impossible," retorted Mollie and once more Amy sighed and folded her hands resignedly in her lap.

"All right," she threatened, "if we only live through this, I'll change my will, that's all, and leave everything to Betty and Mrs. Sanderson."

"Goodness, what have I done?" cried Grace in dismay. "Didn't I just offer you another candy and—and—everything——"

"I didn't notice the everything," said Amy.

"Well, you noticed the candy," retorted Grace with spirit, "and it was the fattest, juiciest one in the box, too."

"Well, give it back, Amy," directed Mollie, and Amy, in the act of swallowing the fat juicy chocolate, choked on a chuckle.

"Too late," she cried. "It is decapitated."

"I thought I heard its death rattle," sighed Grace, mournfully adding, as the girls laughed at her: "Oh, I don't know what's the matter with

me this morning. I never felt so foolish before.

"Girls," she said, and suddenly her voice quivered and her eyes filled, "I've tried so not to think of it, but I can't fight it off much longer. Will and I have always been such chums, played and worked and even—quarreled—together——"

"Please don't, Gracie," cried Betty, her face flushing and her eyes growing dark and wide. "It would be so easy just to g-give way, but we're in the service, too, you know, and we must be at least as b-brave as the boys."

"I—I guess maybe that's impossible," said Mollie, her voice, even her straight little back betraying emotion. "Nobody could be as b-brave as they are."

"Well, we never know what we can do till we try, do we?" cried Betty, that indomitable fighting spirit of hers rising to the emergency. "If we say we can't, of course we can't, but we can do our best, can't we? If the boys aren't c-crying, why should we?"

"That's the way to talk," cried Mollie, straightening defiantly at the challenge. "We don't have to, and, what's more, we won't!"

CHAPTER XVII

TEARS AND PATRIOTISM

It was a valiant determination, that one to smile whatever happened; but somehow, 'way down in their brave hearts, the girls doubted a little. They would do their best, but, after all, they were only human and there are times when to smile is the hardest achievement in the world.

"We're—we're nearly there," ventured Amy, after a little interval of silence, during which the girls had been busily gathering all their resources for the crisis just before them. "Do you suppose we've got in ahead of the boys?"

"Goodness, I should hope so," retorted Mollie, with a brief return of her old spirit. "If this old car couldn't make better time than boys on foot, I'd give it away to any one who'd take it off my hands."

As she spoke the car swung around a sharp curve, and the station that had appeared so attractive to them several months ago, loomed into view. To-day they greeted its appearance with

as much enthusiasm as they would the electric chair.

A train was coming in, but it was not one for the troops. It was a mixed train, composed of one passenger car, a baggage and smoker combined, and several milk cars.

"What a country-looking train," was Amy's comment.

She addressed Betty, but the Little Captain did not answer, for the reason that she was staring into the baggage car, the side door to which was wide open.

"See that man!"

She pointed to an individual who stood in the baggage car, his hands holding up a motorcycle.

"Oh, Betty, is it that man—our motorcyclist——?" began Mollie.

"I am sure it is!" cried Grace.

The man was looking toward the end of the baggage car, so they got only a side look at his face. Then the train moved away and was soon out of sight.

"Well, if that's the fellow, he is gone," murmured Amy.

"Now, maybe, we'll never have a chance to catch him," added Mollie.

"Oh, we'll catch him yet," declared Betty.

Under ordinary circumstances the Outdoor

Girls would have given the incident considerable attention. But now their thoughts were of the soldier boys so soon to leave.

"Didn't the boys say they were entraining for Philadelphia?" asked Grace, trying hard to make her voice sound natural and merely conversational.

"Yes, that's where a great many of them go," Betty answered, praying desperately that she might fight down that flood of tears that every moment threatened to rise and overwhelm her. "I *won't* be weak and f-foolish," she was saying, over and over, to herself. "I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Then the car came to a standstill beside the platform and the girls sat looking at each other, not quite sure what to do next.

"Do you think it would be all right to stay here?" asked Mollie uncertainly. "Of course we could get out when the boys came."

"It's a little conspicuous, don't you think?" suggested Amy mildly.

"Yes, it looks as if we had come to see a parade or something," Grace agreed.

There was a great deal of luggage and many boxes piled at one end of the station and it was upon these that Betty's eyes, roaming in search of some sheltered spot, finally focused.

"We could slip in behind those packing cases and things," she suggested; "and then we could see without being too much seen ourselves."

"Then the boys might not see us," protested Mollie, clenching her teeth over her trembling lip. "We don't want them to think we weren't here to say g-good-bye."

"Well, they'll see the car, won't they?" Betty argued, a little impatiently, for even her sweet temper was beginning to give way under the strain. "They'll know by that that we're here and then if they miss us, they deserve to—that's all."

"Well, I suppose we'll have to take a chance," said Molly, almost crossly, as she jumped out after Betty. "I only wish it was all over. The waiting is getting on my nerves."

"Well, you don't think you're alone in that, do you?" Grace was beginning when Betty interrupted with a little hysterical laugh.

"I—I don't see how it's going to make us feel very much better to quarrel about it," she said, adding whimsically: "Come ahead you two—kiss and make up before the boys come. You know they always said it made them jealous enough to commit murder when we did it in their presence."

They laughed unsteadily, and Mollie threw an

affectionate and repentant arm about the Little Captain's shoulders.

"Betty, dear, you make me ashamed of myself," she said impulsively. "As if you didn't have enough to worry about yourself without my making you more. I'm a selfish pig, that's all."

Just then the sound that they had all been unconsciously listening for struck heavily upon their ears. The regular tramp, tramp of hundreds, thousands, of marching feet!

"Oh, they're coming, they're coming!" cried Amy, in a sort of suffocated little moan.

"Well, of course they're coming," retorted Mollie, her nerves jumping with the effort to speak coolly. "We've been almost expecting that they would, haven't we?"

"Oh, I know. But it all seemed like a terrible d-dream till now," returned Amy, looking so like a bewildered child that Betty put a comforting arm about her and drew her into the little recess beside her.

"It isn't a dream, Amy dear," she said, very steadily. "I don't think we were ever more fully or terribly awake than we are now. Not even that day when we heard of the sinking of the *Lusitania,* did we realize just what this war was going to mean to us. It's only by some sacrifice —some personal sacrifice——" but the brave

voice broke and died into silence while she listened with almost straining intensity to that regular beat of marching feet, coming nearer, ever nearer——

And in the distance came the long, warning whistle of the train—the train that was going to take them away!

"Oh, keep still," cried Mollie, turning with sudden, unreasoning fury toward the oncoming locomotive with the smudge of smoke in its wake, her hands clenched passionately and her black eyes smoldering. "We know you're coming for them—Roy and Allen and Will and Frank and—and—all the others. But that's no reason why you have to rub it in, is it?"

At any other time, the rather unreasoning attack upon the train would have seemed funny to the girls, and even in their trouble a faint gleam of humor came to them, but no one laughed, no one even smiled.

"I—I wonder," said Grace, nervously patting a stray lock of hair into place beneath the smart little hat which, under the spell of excitement, had gotten slightly awry, "if we'll be able to pick our boys out from all that crowd. Oh, girls," taking a quick little survey over the top of her own particular packing case, "they're almost here! Swarms, just swarms of them!"

"Goodness, that sounds like locusts—or mosquitoes," cried Betty hysterically, scarcely knowing what she was saying. "Squeeze in tight, Amy, or you'll get your toes stepped on. Grace, look again. How far away are they?"

"Just around the corner," reported Grace. "Goodness," she cried in sudden panic, "I almost wish we'd stayed in the automobile. I'd feel s-safer——"

"Safer?" cried Mollie scornfully. "I'd like to know what there is to be afraid of. Oh, there you go again," shaking an impotent little fist as the great train rumbled into the station with a screaming of brakes and a shrieking of whistles.

And then the flood broke. Down the station platform came hundreds upon hundreds of khaki-clad figures, talking, gesticulating, faces eagerly flushed, eyes brilliant as they prophetically looked into the future.

"Oh, we'll never be able to pick them out of the crowd," cried Grace despairingly. "I'm getting cross-eyed as it is. Oh, there's Corporal Harris! Yes, and there goes James McDonald! Oh, oh——"

And indeed there were scores of familiar faces among the boys that were passing perhaps forever out of their lives. Some saw the girls and saluted them gaily, but most of them were too in-

"IT MAY BE A LONG TIME, BUT—I'M COMING BACK."

The Outdoor Girls at the Hostess House.

tent upon boarding the train and embarking upon the glorious adventure with as little delay as possible to look either to the right or the left.

Then, just as the girls thought they must have missed "their own particular four" and were bracing themselves to stand the disappointment, they saw them!

They were together, the four of them, splendid specimens of young manhood with their cropped heads and service hats and packs slung over their backs.

"Allen," cried Betty impulsively, and he turned as though shot, a deep flush staining his face.

They came over then, those four, to the girls they were leaving indefinitely—perhaps forever. Their young faces were very grave, their jaws grim and set, and the girls realized suddenly that these were not the boys who had so joyously left Deepdale in the service of their country. These were no longer careless, irresponsible boys, but men with a great and glorious duty to perform, and their hearts thrilled with a new pride.

And while eloquent things were being said, not only with lips, but with eyes and clasping hands, Allen bent nearer to Betty's little, upturned face.

"It may be a long, long time, little girl," he whispered, gravely, "but—I'm coming back. And, Betty, I have your picture—that little snap-

shot you gave me, the laughing one, you remember?"

Betty nodded, smiling bravely while she choked back something deep down in her throat.

"And——" his eyes had grown very wistful, "and—I'm counting on some letters from you, Betty?"

"Oh, Allen," she cried breathlessly, "I'll write you all the time, dear, every day——"

But he had caught both her hands in his and was drawing her irresistibly toward him.

"'Dear,'" he was repeating dizzily, incredulously. "Did you call me that, Betty? Did you say 'dear'?"

"Y-yes," she nodded, breathless, a little frightened, yet adorably brave. Why, this was Allen, and he was going away! He might be killed over there! She might never see him again! "And," she added, looking up into his eyes with a shy recklessness, "I—I'd say it again, Allen, if you asked me——"

With a little cry he drew her to him, and for one unbelievable, breathless second his lips rested on hers.

"Betty, Betty, I love you," he whispered unsteadily. "I'll be dreaming of you always. Whatever I do 'over there' will be because of you——" The whistle shrieked a rude warning

and his hands tightened on hers. They were both trembling a little.

"Good-bye," he whispered hoarsely. "I—love —you——" then he tore himself away, swinging up the steps and into the car.

The train began to move amid a great storm of cheering and waving of service hats. Betty saw it all dimly, through a mist of tears. She pressed her hand against her lips to still their trembling.

"Good-bye, dear," she murmured brokenly.

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER THE BOYS LEFT

"WELL—it's—over," sighed Grace, as they made their way slowly down the platform to where the machine stood waiting. "I feel as though I'd like to go home and cry for a week without stopping."

"Favorite indoor sport," retorted Mollie, wiping her own eyes impatiently. "I'm sure the boys would admire us for doing that."

"I don't think they'd admire us very much if they could see us now," sighed Amy, dabbing a rather red nose with a generous portion of talcum powder. "Crying is so terribly damaging to my particular style of beauty! Every time I do it I vow I never will again——"

"And then the boys do foolish things like going away to be shot," finished Mollie, "and—poof, go all our good resolutions."

"But you girls are all Helen of Troys compared to me when I cry," said Grace, her tear-dimmed eyes fixed mournfully on space. "Why,

after I've had a good cry I cover up all the mirrors in the house for a couple of days afterward."

"I guess," sighed Betty, "that just about everybody we know went away on that train this morning. Oh, girls, I feel as though somebody were dead."

"Well, I'd rather be, than look like this," said Grace, eyeing her somewhat disheveled reflection in the tiny mirror somberly.

"Oh, you're not quite as bad as that, Gracie," Betty comforted her, laughing a little despite the ache at her heart. "A little cold water and a curling iron will work wonders——"

"Betty," cried Grace, pausing in the act of applying still more powder to the tip of her nose and regarding the Little Captain with a horrified expression, "why drag the mention of such unromantic things into the open——"

"Goodness, nothing could be much more unromantic than straight hair and red noses," broke in Mollie practically. "It's lucky the boys don't do this every day—I'd be a wreck in a week!"

"Well, at least you'd be wrecked in a good cause," said Betty, half wistfully, half whimsically.

"Goodness, you'll make me cry again after I've just powdered my nose," cried Grace in alarm,

and the foolishness of it made them all laugh.

"You're a goose, Gracie," Mollie commented. "But I love you, just the same. Now," she added, "who's going to take the wheel while I do my duty with the powder puff? I need both hands you know——"

"Heavens, don't let Amy do it," cried Grace, in still greater alarm. "She doesn't know a thing about it. Mollie, what are you doing?"

"You put the powder on then," Mollie suggested, and Amy reached for the vanity case. "If you can't drive you can at least do that much. Amy! you're getting it in my eyes. Do be careful!"

"Mollie Billette, if you dare use that word again," cried Amy, her eyes twinkling, "I'll blind you with powder—just for spite!"

The girls chuckled, and Mollie, figuratively speaking, threw up her hands.

"Oh, all right," she said, meekly yielding up her nose to treatment. "I surrender. Only, Amy, do be——"

Amy raised the puff threateningly, and the badgered one continued hastily: "I was only going to say—do be a nice little girl."

"As if I were not always that!" retorted Amy, dabbing so liberally at the unfortunate member that Mollie sneezed, bumped over a rock in the

road and nearly dashed the car against that long-threatening tree.

"Oh, goodness! I was sure we'd never come out of this alive," cried Grace miserably. "Isn't it enough to have our hearts broken, without our necks in the bargain?"

"Oh, might as well make a good job of it," returned Mollie cheerfully. "I don't know that I'd mind very much, anyway."

"Oh, now I know I'm going to cry!" wailed Grace, wiping a starting tear with her handkerchief. "Just when we're almost at Camp, too, and apt to meet somebody any minute——"

"Didn't you just hear Betty say," Mollie broke in, with the patient air one assumes in speaking to little children, "that everybody who is really worth anything has gone away on that train?"

"Well, I guess I didn't altogether mean that," said Betty thoughtfully. "Of course there is the medical personnel that is stationed here indefinitely and very much against its will. And, of course," she added, after a moment's pause. "there is Sergeant Mullins."

"Goodness! we did forget all about him, didn't we?" agreed Mollie, as though surprised at herself. "I don't know how we could have done such a thing!"

"And he's simply desperate at being kept here,"

added Amy suddenly. "He's done everything he possibly could to get away, but they say they need him more here than on the other side, and so, of course, he can't do a thing."

"How did you know?" they asked in chorus, growing gleeful as she colored under their gaze.

"Why, he—he told me," she stammered.

"Aha! I have you now, woman," cried Mollie, with a deep villain frown. "Secret meetings on moonlit nights——"

"This one happened to be in the broad daylight, in the glare of noon," Amy retorted. "And if you can find anything secret or romantic about that, you're welcome to."

Mollie stared for a minute, then joined in the laugh.

"Strike one," she cried. "But do tell us, Amy dear, about this meeting with Sergeant Mullins that occurred in the broad light of day. It must have been interesting—though unforeseen," she added hastily, as Amy turned a suspicious eye upon her.

"Yes, Amy, I humbly beseech you," added Grace.

"No, sir, I have been insulted enough," declared Amy stoutly, and nothing they could say seemed to have any effect upon her decision.

"You ask her, Betty," entreated Grace at last,

turning to the Little Captain, who had been very silent and thoughtful during the ride. "She'll do anything for you, you know."

Betty brought back her wandering attention with a start. She had been thinking of those last words of Allen's, had been seeing again that exalted look in his eyes, could feel again the trembling of his hands as he grasped hers in a grip that hurt—hurt gloriously.

"Wh-what did you say?" she asked, dimly conscious of having been addressed. "I—I'm afraid I wasn't listening."

"I'm afraid you weren't," returned Grace, throwing a loving arm about her.

Then she repeated Amy's confession and her own question, and gradually there began to dawn in Betty's eyes a real interest.

"Oh, Amy, do tell us about it," she begged earnestly. "You know he has always been something of a mystery to us because of his reserve, and we'd love to know more about him. You know we're really not curious—just truly interested."

"Well," agreed Amy, with a smile, not able to resist Betty—nobody ever was for long—"of course, I'll tell you all there is to tell—although it really isn't much. I was hurrying along the parade a day or two ago, watching the boys drill,

when somebody ran plump into me and made me drop the package I was carrying. I gasped and started to apologize for not looking where I was going when I saw that it was Sergeant Mullins. Then we both laughed and he picked up my package and offered to see me safely back to the Hostess House. Now what are you laughing at, Mollie?"

"I was just thinking," Mollie chuckled, "of the desperate need there was of a brave escort and of all the lions and tigers that were apt to attack you on the parade——"

"Well, you don't have to be silly," Amy retorted hotly, flushing despite herself, adding, rather lamely: "He said it was so no one else would run into me."

"Worse and worse, and more of it," chortled Mollie, skidding deftly about a curve. "What an excuse!"

"Oh, all right then," Amy was beginning indignantly, when Grace hurriedly thrust the candy box beneath her nose.

"Have one, honey," she said, in a voice of sugar sweetness. "You needn't pay any attention to Mollie, you know. We're listening."

"Well," Amy continued, slightly mollified, "it was then he told me all about the ambition he had had of being one of the first on the firing line and

how hard it was to train all the boys to go after the Huns and then not have a chance at them himself."

"And, of course, you told him the same old thing about his doing a great deal more for his country here than he could do on the other side——" began Mollie.

"Well, what else was there to say?" Amy replied. a little sharply. "Of course, it didn't make him feel any better, and I knew in my heart that it wouldn't, but anything's better than just staying quiet and acting foolish."

"And natural," murmured Grace.

"Anyway, he seemed to understand that I was really sorry for him," Amy continued, not noticing the interruption. "He said he was sorry he'd bothered me with his grouchiness, that he wouldn't have felt so bad about it if it hadn't been for all the boys going away, and he supposed he'd even get used to that after a while if he tried hard enough.

"Just the same, he did look mighty grim as he turned away," she finished, with a little smile at the memory, "and he said something about not being surprised if he got mad at the last minute and hitched on the rear platform, anyway."

"It's wonderful how eager they all are," said Betty, her eyes shining and a little catch in her

voice. "I suppose there are slackers, lots of them, but so far I haven't met a boy who wasn't desperate at being given a 'safe berth' away from the firing line and danger.

"It never seems to enter their minds to be thankful that they don't have to run the risk of having their arms and legs shot off, or perhaps being blinded for life.

"And it isn't that they don't think of it, either," she went on, her face flushing with enthusiasm, "or realize what it means. Just the other night Will was talking to me, Gracie—you know he's always been almost as much my brother as yours—and he said, 'I tell you what, Betty, it isn't often I let the grim side of this war business get to me, and it's the same with the other fellows. Of course we know it's there, but we're willing to take the bad with the good for the sake of doing what we're pretty darn sure is the only thing to do. Only,' he added, slowly, 'we're none of us pretending to say that we enjoy the idea of being maimed or perhaps crippled for life. There's not one of us but who's praying that if we have to go, it will be a good swift bullet that will do the business.

"'But,' he added, with a smile—and I could have hugged him for that smile, girls. 'But, of course, as I said before, we're not thinking of

that side of it. It's enough to know that if it comes, we'll know how to meet it.' "

"And th-that's my brother," cried Grace, half tearful, yet radiant with pride in him. "Those horrible old Huns won't have even half a chance when he gets at them."

"And Frank and Allen and Roy," added Mollie loyally. "You can't leave any one of our boys out, Gracie. They're all built on the same plan—as far as bravery is concerned."

"Of course, I know that," said Grace, her eyes softening with the picture of Roy as he had said good-bye—so youthfully gay, yet so strangely self-reliant.

And Mollie's eyes that could flash so wrathfully at times, were also soft with memory, and Amy, thinking of those last words that were almost, yes, so very near, a promise, flushed hotly and wondered if after all she ought—so soon——"

"It's no wonder that we're proud of them—our boys," said Betty softly.

CHAPTER XIX

REAL TRAGEDY

A DAY or two went by during which the girls tried pluckily to go on with their duties about the Hostess House with bright and smiling faces. It was hard, though, to keep their thoughts from wandering to the four boys who were now on their way to face all the realities and all the horrors of the terrible war, and perhaps it was well that the leaving of so many made their duties lighter than usual.

On their return from the station after seeing the boys entrain they had found a letter from their friend, Mrs. Barton Ross, of their home town of Deepdale, head of the Young Women's Christian Association, under whose auspices the Hostess House at Camp Liberty was run. In this letter Mrs. Ross had said that she had sent to the girls a box of books for which they had sent a request—books all of which one boy or another had asked for, and which the regular Camp library had not been able to supply.

The books had now come, Mollie had learned on a visit to the postoffice, and as it was a heavy package she had got out the car and with the other girls had run down for it.

As the car rolled up to the curb and stopped once more before the Hostess House, Betty waved her hand to an upper window.

"There's Mrs. Sanderson," she explained as they got out of the automobile. "She looks kind of pathetic sitting up there all alone."

"She always looks pathetic to me," sighed Amy, winding an arm about the Little Captain as they ascended the steps. "But everybody looks sadder and more forlorn than usual the past few days."

"Well, we can't be sad and forlorn any longer," said Betty determinedly. "We came here to cheer people up, you know, and how we're going to do it by being doleful ourselves, I don't know. So, in the words of the vulgar—'here goes.' How's that?"

"That" was a rather forced and pitiful little smile, but it brought an answering one from Amy and another warm hug.

"You're just wonderful, Betty!" she said lovingly, "and we'll do just whatever you say. If you want us to smile, we'll smile, that's all. Of course, we have tried, but we'll try still harder."

Betty hugged back, and they went up the stairs

toward the old familiar room, feeling better and more cheerful for their renewed good resolutions.

For a while the girls were busy unpacking the books and putting them in place. Then Betty announced her intention of calling on Mrs. Sanderson.

"I can't bear to think of her in there by the window all alone," she said. "It has been awfully hard for her to watch all those boys going away, knowing that her Willie wasn't among them. I might be able to comfort her a little."

"Let me go too," begged Amy, and arm in arm the two girls went on their little mission of kindness.

They knocked on the door, but, receiving no answer, pushed it open and stepped inside the room. The old lady was sitting in exactly the same position as when Betty had seen her from the car, almost an hour before.

She glanced up, a little startled when they spoke to her, and half rose to her feet. She looked dazed and very old and drawn. With a little cry of compassion, Betty ran over to her and gently forced her back into her chair.

"Did we startle you?" she asked anxiously. "We knocked, but you didn't answer, and we came right in. I'm sorry——"

"You needn't be, dearie." The old eyes twin-

kled and the old hand was very gentle as it patted Betty's cheek reassuringly. "I'm always glad to see you and I've told you to come right in any time. I was thinking very hard, I guess, and that's why I didn't hear you."

"Then we may stay a little while?" said Betty, relieved. "But please tell us if we'll be a bother," she added hastily, as the old woman turned once more to the window.

"No, no, I was hoping you would come," said the latter so eagerly that Betty knew her impulse had been a correct one. The old woman had wanted some one—some one who understood—to pour out her heart to.

"It was wonderful just to sit here and watch those boys who went, an' I've been thinkin' of it," she said, after a brief silence. "Only, somethin' inside o' me, I guess 'twas my heart, kept bleedin' an' cryin' out that my boy should have been among them—my little brown-eyed Willie who used to sit out in the sun readin' every minute he could get. I can see him now, sittin' there, jest as if 'twas yesterday——" Her voice trailed off, and in a silence eloquent with sympathy the girls waited for her to go on.

"But I wanted to tell those boys too," she cried, straightening up with sudden fire, "that my Willie wasn't only a reader an' as bright as a dollar,—

he could fight, too. He'd have made a soldier to be proud of.

"It wouldn't be near so bad," she added, turning to the girls with such a depth of tragedy in her eyes that their hearts bled for her, "if I could only be sure o' his bein' dead. It's the heartbreak of not knowin' that's goin' to kill me in the end!

"But there," she said, catching herself up as though ashamed of the outburst, "seems like I talk to you little ladies more'n I ever talked to anybody else in all my life. Seems like it's jest been bottled up inside o' me so long it's jest got to come out.

"I wish you'd tell me," she added, looking at them wistfully, "when it bothers you, an' I'll jest bottle it all up again twice as tight as 'twas before."

"Oh, please," cried Amy, taking one of the work-worn hands and pressing it earnestly between her own warm ones. "We just feel honored to think that you trust us enough and like us enough to tell us these things. If you didn't we'd be miserable!"

"Indeed we should," added Betty fervently.

Mrs. Sanderson looked from one of the flushed earnest faces to the other, and her eyes filled slowly with tears.

"I never thought," she said tremulously, "that there were girls like you in the world."

Several days later Mrs. Watson, their chaperone, and the head of the Hostess House, called the girls to her for a consultation, and, wondering what new thing was in store for them, they responded to the call.

The boys had been gone for a week, time enough to get accustomed—a little—to the feeling of loss that had so oppressed them during the first few days.

And now there were rumors of new soldiers arriving at the camp and of more than enough work for the girls at the Hostess House to keep their minds continually occupied.

And, in fact, it was to discuss that very situation that Mrs. Watson had called them to her this morning.

"Well, girls," she said when they had seated themselves in characteristic attitudes about the room, "we've had a little breathing spell now, just enough time to rest up before the next onslaught."

She paused over the word, smiled, and they smiled back at her.

"Of course that means," Betty interpreted, "that not only the boys but hundreds of their relatives and friends are coming to be entertained and housed and amused."

"Exactly," nodded Mrs. Watson. "And, of course, the work that you girls have done——"

"And you," Betty interjected loyally, but Mrs. Watson brushed the interruption aside with a wave of her hand, though she flushed happily.

"Of course I've done my part of it," she agreed modestly. "But equally of course I couldn't have done it if you girls hadn't stood shoulder to shoulder with me. And," she added, enthusiastically, "it has been more the spirit with which you did the work than the actual work itself that has won such a reputation for our Hostess House here."

" 'Reputation!' " repeated Mollie wonderingly, then added with an impish inflection: "Oh, have we one of those things?"

"We have," responded Mrs. Watson, with an indulgent smile. "And, whether deserved or not, modesty would prompt us to say that it is not, of course——" and the girls laughed amusedly. "Our reputation is unusually good and unusually widespread. So good, in fact, that the boys are glad when they find they are to be sent to Camp Liberty.

"Yes," Betty nodded thoughtfully, "several boys have told me that, but I thought they only said it in a spirit of gratitude, or perhaps, as flattery."

"That is modest," said Mrs. Watson with another smile. "But," she added, leaning forward in her chair and speaking earnestly, "I honestly think that you girls don't even begin to realize what a wonderful work you have been doing right here in this little city that sprang up over night. It isn't a small thing, you know—sending thousands of our boys away cheered and strengthened, armed to meet the future—better men, just for having met you.

"And the mothers and wives and sweethearts who have been entertained so royally and permitted to say good-bye to their loved ones under the very best and cheeriest conditions possible—why, they have spoken to me of you with tears in their eyes!"

There were tears in their own eyes as the girls smiled happily at her.

"But it's been such fun," Mollie protested, "just seeing how much you can make people forget their troubles."

"That's it," Mrs. Watson broke in quickly. "That's the spirit that has made your work here such a wonderful success. You've done it—and whether you will admit it or not, sometimes we've all been so tired at night we've ached in every joint and muscle when we've crawled into bed—because you loved to do it and because it was

'fun' to make people forget their troubles, if only for a little while, and be happy.

"That's the secret, dear girls, and that's why the boys are all eager to be assigned here. Also, the boys in the permanent garrison will sing your praises to the few who have not already heard them, and of course we shall have to live up to their opinion of us."

"Well, if just doing what we have been doing gives us such a reputation," said Amy soberly, "I guess it won't be hard to live up to it in the future."

"Only," said Mrs. Watson warningly, "the work before us is apt to be very much more trying and arduous than any we have yet had. The camp is going to be filled to overflowing, and of course that will mean entertaining continually for us.

"We may even," she added thoughtfully, "have to quarter some of the relatives and friends outside the camp in private homes, and, of course, it will be up to us to find those homes."

"You mean we are to go canvassing—the way we did that Thanksgiving?" queried Betty.

Mrs. Watson nodded, and Grace groaned.

"Well," said the latter, "I don't care. In fact, I rather like the idea if only my feet will hold out."

"They look pretty durable," remarked Mollie gravely.

"But you don't know how they feel," retorted Grace, wiggling one foot in its trim slipper experimentally. "Every time I get a pair of shoes I have to get a size larger, and you know," argumentatively, "at that rate I'll be a freak and you'll be able to charge admission for a look at me."

"Good," cried Mrs. Watson, laughing with the others. "I knew some one would be clever enough to think up a new way of making money. Keep it right up, Grace."

"Yes," said Betty drolly, "just think of the good you can do!"

CHAPTER XX

THE MOTORCYCLIST AGAIN

"WHAT a glorious morning!" cried Betty, raising her face to the brilliant sunshine. "I feel as if I could walk miles and miles and miles and never stop."

"Well, it's lucky for you that you do," sighed Grace. "Perhaps you'd be willing to walk a few for me."

"Oh, don't give up, Gracie dear, before we've even started," cried Betty, giving a little exuberant skip with the sheer joy of being alive. "Anyway," she added, with inspiration, "if you get tired you and Mollie can go back and get the car."

"And have to walk miles to get it," Grace objected. "No, Betty, you'll have to think up something better than that."

"I wouldn't waste my time on such a lazy person, Betty," said Mollie, who was walking briskly ahead with Amy. "I suppose we might have brought the car," she added, after a minute, "only

it seems foolish when you have to stop at every house you come to."

"It not only *seems* foolish—it *is* foolish," said Betty cheerily.

"Oh, I tell you what," cried Amy, seized with sudden inspiration, while the girls stared at her expectantly.

"Hasten, Amy," cried Mollie, in a mock agony of suspense. "Do not keep us waiting in this fashion."

"Well," said Amy with a twinkle, "let's buy a couple of the worst sounding horns we can find in town, go back and get Mollie's car——"

"Yes?" they queried breathlessly.

"And go through the streets tooting the horns until we've collected a crowd," finished Amy triumphantly.

"And when we've got it, what'll we do with it?" queried Mollie reasonably.

"Well, I should think you'd guess the rest," remarked Amy. "We could just tell 'em what we'd come for, that's all, and ask all who were willing to take a 'guest' to say 'aye.' "

"Never mind, dear, there's still hope," remarked Mollie, patting her arm soothingly. "The doctor said, with absolute rest and quiet, you might get over it."

Betty chuckled. Grace did not, for the reason

that her feet were beginning to hurt and she did not feel in a chuckling mood.

"Well, I don't know but what there's something in your idea after all, Amy," she said, while Amy looked immensely gratified. "I'm in favor of anything that cuts out walking."

" 'Cuts out'?" queried Mollie reprovingly.

"Yes, cuts out," returned Grace, sticking to her guns. "What do you say, Betty? Don't you think Amy has the right idea?"

"Well," said Betty diplomatically, while her eyes twinkled at the imaginary spectacle of whirling through the streets of the town, blowing raucously on horns and making stump speeches from the running board of the machine, "it would at least have the advantage of being spectacular——"

"There, Mollie!" cried Amy, not waiting for her to finish, the light of triumph in her eyes. "You see it's three to one. Now, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Nothing," remarked Mollie dryly, "except to suggest that you wait until Betty gets through. I imagine she hadn't said all she wanted to on the subject."

"Hadn't you, Betty?" queried Amy, a trifle disconcerted and looking back at Betty over her shoulder.

"We-ll," said Betty slowly, "I never say a thing can't be done until it's tried——"

"There!" Grace exclaimed, but Betty interrupted her.

"But," she said hastily, "I think it might be just as well to try the less spectacular method first. Don't you?"

Both Amy and Grace heaved a great sigh of disappointment.

"For one beautiful moment," said Grace plaintively, "I dared to hope that you were with us, Betty."

"Goodness, I am!" exclaimed the latter, wilfully misunderstanding. "With you to the death, if need be. But look," she added as they turned a corner, "Methinks we have pretty nearly reached the scene of our activity."

"Methinks it's pretty nearly time," groaned Grace.

"I tell you what we'll do," suggested Betty, as they crowded eagerly about her. "It will save time, and, I think, be the easiest way. We'll each one take an entire street, visit as many of the houses as possible within an hour, and at the end of that time we'll meet here again and each make her report."

The others agreed to this, and they separated, each determined to find as many boarding places

as possible for those relatives and friends who wished to be near their soldier boys.

At the end of the hour they met again, looking a little warm and tired, but immensely triumphant.

Grace was wildly excited.

"Yes, I found places," she said, in answer to a question from Betty. "But what do you think?—I saw that motorcyclist."

"You did!" came in a chorus from the other Outdoor Girls.

"Of course you mean the rascal who ran down poor Mrs. Sanderson," came from Mollie.

"The same. I was so startled I hardly knew what to do. He was coming from a small hotel—not a very nice place."

"Maybe that is where he plays cards," suggested Betty.

"As soon as he saw me he leaped on his motorcycle and left in a hurry, before I had a chance to say a word to him."

"What a shame that you didn't have a chance to have him arrested," cried Amy.

The girls talked the matter over for several minutes. As the motorcyclist was gone there seemed nothing they could do.

"But we'll keep our eyes open for him," declared Betty.

"I think this is the most wonderful town," Mollie remarked after a pause. "Why there's hardly a house that I visited but what the people were willing to accommodate at least one boarder, and in some cases two or three, and, what's more," waving her hand enthusiastically, "several of them didn't even want to take any money for it."

"And I found almost the very same thing," agreed Betty, as they linked arms and started on the homeward walk. "I guess we have enough promises to start with now, and I don't think we'll have any trouble finding quarters for all who want them."

"I shouldn't wonder if Mrs. Watson is right about our reputation," said Grace, a little ruefully. "Because the minute Mrs. Robinson opened the door and saw me she said she hadn't the slightest idea what I was going to ask her this time, but, seeing it was one of the girls from the Hostess House, she expected to say yes, anyway."

The girls laughed and for some time afterward walked on in silence, busy with their thoughts. Then suddenly Betty spoke.

"Girls," she said soberly, "Mrs. Sanderson is almost well again and I don't think we'll be able to keep her with us very much longer."

"What do you mean?" they cried together,

their voices showing how very real their concern was.

"Well," Betty explained slowly, "it seems she overheard some of us girls talking about the rush of work in store for us and got it into her head that we might need her room."

"But I don't see what difference that makes," protested Mollie. "As long as we're doubling up and giving her our room."

"Well, of course, it appears that way to us," replied Betty, shaking her head thoughtfully. "But I'm afraid we can't hope to make her see it so. Anyway, Mrs. Watson said she spoke to her about it and said she would be going as soon as she had a chance to say good-bye to the 'young ladies.'"

For a long time the girls stared straight before them, deeply troubled. It was not so much the thought of losing the old lady, although, having grown fond of her, they would miss her badly, as it was the realization that here was one person in deep trouble, whose burden they could not seem in any way to lighten.

"And we haven't been able to get hold of that motorcyclist," mourned Mollie. "It makes me simply ferocious," she added, with sudden vigor, "to think of his getting away with a thing like that and not even a day in prison to show for it."

"And now with the boys gone," added Amy, "I don't suppose we'll have a chance in the world of capturing him."

"Humph," groaned Grace disgustedly, the temporary glow of success fading before the torture of aching feet, "I don't see that they helped very much when they were here. We did the suggesting, and all they did was to laugh at our suggestions——"

"Well, there's no use in saying things about them now they're gone," said Amy, but Mollie caught her up indignantly.

"Goodness, Amy," she cried, "it may not be your fault that you have a gloomy disposition, but you don't need to sound exactly like a funeral!"

At this moment they were startled by the sound of a machine coming behind them at furious speed. Some chickens, crossing the road and pecking lazily as they went, scurried with alarmed squawking into the woods on either side.

The girls, turning, started, gasped, then stared at each other.

"The motorcyclist!" cried Mollie, as they turned and ran after the fast disappearing machine.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHASE

"I—I—DON'T know what we're running after him for!" gasped Mollie. "We haven't got a chance—in the world—of catching—him."

"Look," panted Betty, pointing to a machine at the side of the road with a man in chauffeur's uniform sitting behind the wheel, "maybe we can get him! Quick——"

Betty's action always followed hard upon the heels of impulse, and before any of the girls had time to realize what she was going to do she had darted across the road, had said a few excited words, and was tumbling into the tonneau.

Without stopping to question, the girls followed, jumping in beside her, and the chauffeur, after one surprised look, touched his cap and the machine leapt forward like a wild thing.

Mollie had time, even in her excitement, to wonder how Betty had managed it.

"I think she hypnotizes them," she muttered to herself.

And all Betty had really said to the man was, "Please follow that motorcyclist! We mustn't lose sight of him!" and the man, obeying that impulse for adventure that is in all of us, had complied.

The motorcyclist had sped around the corner and darted into one of the side streets. A few minutes later the chauffeur turned the same corner with a recklessness that made them gasp, turned it just in time to see their quarry disappearing round another corner.

"Gosh, that fellow can coax some speed out of that machine of his!" cried the man at the wheel. "But if you young ladies don't mind a little danger, we may catch him yet."

"Oh, please don't think about us," cried Betty, her hands clutching the back of the seat, her eyes straining after the flying speck that seemed to be growing smaller every second. "Oh, we must catch him,—we must! It would be awful to lose him now!"

"Well, here goes," responded the man behind the wheel, and under his skillful touch the machine leapt forward like a spirited horse at the touch of the lash.

"That's it, that's it!" cried Mollie, almost beside herself with excitement. "Just hear that engine purr! He can't get away from us now!"

"Oh, if we could only take him back to Camp Liberty with us!"

"I thought so," said the chauffeur, and even in their excitement they had time to look in surprise at his back.

"Wh-what did you think?" stammered Betty.

"That you were the girls up at the Hostess House that everybody is talking about," he told her, while the girls fairly gasped with surprise at this proof of their widespread fame. "That's why I didn't ask questions but just did as I was told," he added. And somehow they knew, though they could not see his face, that he was grinning. "You see, I'd always heard that you most always got what you set out to get, and I didn't waste time arguin'," he finished.

The girls laughed hysterically, and Betty said, with a funny little inflection:

"Sounds as if we were very strong-minded. But we don't care about that," she added, once more fixing her gaze anxiously on the road before them, "if we can only catch that man."

"May I ask who he is, miss?" asked the man.

"He's—he's a—criminal!" returned Betty, her little fists clenched fiercely.

"A criminal?" he repeated with interest. "May I ask what kind?"

"A murderer," cried Mollie fiercely, adding, as

the man started and the girls looked at her in surprise: "Well, he might just as well have been. He didn't even stop to see whether he was or not, which is about the same thing."

There was a sound from the front seat that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle, but not being quite sure, the girls could do nothing whatever about it.

"But look—he's getting away from us!" wailed Amy suddenly, and once more all their attention was focused on the chase.

And, quite suddenly, while they watched, the motorcyclist disappeared from view as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

A few seconds later, with a grinding of brakes, the car stopped at the spot where he had disappeared, and the girls looked at one another despairingly.

The path that he had taken seemed no more than a broad foot path through the woods, so narrow that no machine could follow him, and of course there was no chance of catching him on foot.

"He got away from us!" cried Grace, voicing a rather self-evident fact.

"I'm afraid so, miss," said the man, and he seemed so genuinely disappointed that they looked at him gratefully. "The man must be rather

much of a dare-devil, your criminal," he added, eyeing the bumpy path thoughtfully. "An ordinary rider wouldn't be able to go two yards along that path without coming to grief."

"Do you know where this path leads to?" asked Betty, struck with a sudden inspiration. "If there's another road we might circle round and head him off."

"Sorry, miss," he said, "but the road that path leads to is nothing but a wagon road, and we'd have to go several miles before we'd cross it. And the chances are," he added, "that the fellow would double back upon himself and we'd have the run for nothing."

Betty shook her head resignedly, for, hard as it was to relinquish the man, all that the chauffeur had said was founded on hard common sense and she could see there was no alternative.

"I guess you're right," she said at last, after a pause during which the girls had looked at her hopefully. Betty so often found a way where no one else could that they never completely gave up hope until she herself relinquished it.

So now they sighed and climbed soberly back into the machine.

"Where to?" inquired the chauffeur, as he turned the car and headed back the way they had come. "If you're going back to the camp," he

suggested, "I can take you there. Or anywhere you say."

"You've been awfully good," cried Betty, with real gratitude in her voice. "But you don't have to take us away back to camp. If you will drop us at the end of the road we can walk back." All this despite sundry vigorous and desperate shakings of Grace's head and pantomimic pointings toward her feet. At the conclusion of Betty's sentence she groaned, but brightened up again at the chauffeur's response.

"It won't be any trouble," he said, "to take you all the way back to camp. In fact"—a little shyly—"I'd like to."

"Then we'd be very, very glad to accept," said Betty cordially. "For we have walked a long way and are rather tired."

At the gates of Camp Liberty they got out of the car, thanked the chauffeur, and while they were hesitating whether or not to offer him money for his trouble, the latter turned the car and, with a last lifting of his cap and waving of his hand, was gone.

"Isn't he nice?" sighed Amy, as they started toward the Hostess House, Grace limping a little and bringing up the rear. "Meeting a man like that gives you new faith in human nature."

"Goodness, Will had better look out," chaffed

Mollie, a little gleam of humor shining through her weariness. "I always thought you had it in you to run off with a chauffeur, Amy."

Before Amy had time to retort they saw a stalwart and familiar figure swinging toward them and recognized Sergeant Mullins.

"Good afternoon," he called to them, with the smile that always so surprisingly lighted up his usually grave face. "You look as if you had had rather an exciting time of it."

"Oh, we did almost have such a beautiful adventure!" cried Mollie, her eyes sparkling with the memory of it.

"And all we really got," said Grace gloomily, "were four pairs of sore feet."

Sergeant Mullins laughed at her with the rest, then asked, with real interest:

"But the adventure that you almost had,—would you mind telling me about it?"

Whereupon Betty launched into a full and graphic account of the chase in somebody else's automobile after an unknown criminal who, at the last minute, had escaped in an apparently impossible manner.

"And that's all there is to it," she finished plaintively. "After all our trouble and everything, we find ourselves just where we were before."

The sergeant looked very grave.

"The man was a cad," he said, "to knock down an old woman that way and then not stop to see how badly she was hurt. I wish you could have won out to-day. Could you give a good description of him?"

"Yes, I can," cried both Amy and Grace in the same breath, and thereupon proceeded to do it without delay. At the description the sergeant's interest grew and his face flushed with excitement.

When they had finished, Betty, who had been watching his face closely, unable to restrain her curiosity longer, burst forth an eager question.

"Have you seen the man, Sergeant?"

"I think I have—often," he replied slowly, adding as they turned incredulous eyes upon him. "If I'm not mistaken, this criminal of yours is one of the most famous card sharpers of the day."

CHAPTER XXII

STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS

For a moment the girls stared. Then Sergeant Mullins was besieged with a veritable flood of questions.

"He hangs out mostly at Thomasville, a town about fifteen miles from here," the sergeant explained, when at last the girls had realized that if they ever hoped to learn anything at all they must give the man a chance to speak. "And he makes most of his money by skinning the rookies."

"You mean," cried Betty, translating camp slang into intelligible English, "that he gets the newly enlisted men to play with him before they have a chance to learn his reputation, and of course gets all their money, because his game is crooked?"

"Exactly," agreed Sergeant Mullins, his grave face clouding angrily. "And equally, of course, it's the week following pay day when he makes his big haul. I hope you succeed in getting him,"

he said, turning earnestly to Betty. "And if there's anything I can do to help, you can count on me."

Betty thanked him, and the girls watched the Sergeant's straight, retreating back with thoughtful eyes.

"Well, it's a comfort anyway," said Mollie, as they turned and went into the house, "to know that he's as bad as we thought he was. And perhaps," she added hopefully, "Sergeant Mullins will be able to help us."

It was more than a week later when the first eagerly looked for letters began to arrive from overseas. It was one day when the promised rush of soldiers into the camp had been fulfilled and the girls were particularly busy entertaining and finding comfortable quarters for their relatives and friends that Mollie whispered the joyful news into Betty's ear.

"Letters!" she cried. "Letters, honey! Here are yours, two of them, and each one of us others got one apiece. We've decided not to open them until to-night, when we'll have time to read them in comfort. If you'll wait, too——"

"Of course," promised Betty, eagerly accepting her portion of the precious correspondence. "And they're thick ones, Mollie, and——"

"Both from Allen," Mollie finished mischiev-

ously, looking back over her shoulder to enjoy Betty's blush.

And that night, when they should have been tired out with the day's unusually hard work, the girls assembled in their one big room, feeling more wide awake than ever before in all their lives.

"Oh, hasn't it been perfectly awful," cried Mollie, facing them with shining eyes, "to have to go around calmly for hours and hours as if nothing had happened?"

"With a letter just begging to be read, too!" put in Betty, two fever spots of excitement on her cheeks. "I don't think I could ever do it again."

"Well, it's all over now," said Amy, taking her own thick and promising looking letter from her silk blouse where it had rustled and crackled betrayingly all day. "I don't know about you girls, but I just can't wait another second."

"Oh, please wait just a moment until I get my shoes off," begged Grace, sinking down on the edge of the bed and removing the shoes from her aching feet. "Oh dear," she moaned, "I know I'll have to get a size larger next time, and if I do I'll be ashamed to be seen in the street."

"Well, even my patient and much-tried pedal extremities feel a little the worse for wear to-

night," admitted Mollie, as she flung a shoe vindictively to the farthest corner of the room.

"And mine," agreed Betty, taking up the plaint. "I tell you what," she added. "Let's all just get undressed and tumble into the big bed and—enjoy ourselves."

The suggestion was unanimously accepted, and thereafter various soft and filmy garments flew thick and fast as the girls got ready for the treat which had been postponed all through the long, long day,—almost the longest they had ever known.

"Come on, Gracie," called Mollie, as barely five minutes later three figures sat propped up in the bed, waiting impatiently for the fourth. "What's the use of primping to-night? Nobody's going to see you."

"You flatter yourself," drawled Grace, as she turned away from the mirror. "Anyway, I once read that a girl should never allow herself to look homely, even when she's alone."

"Goodness, if I have to work so hard to be beautiful," retorted Mollie, holding her letter up to the light in a vain attempt to read its contents through the envelope, "I'd rather be good and homely and comfortable."

"If all wishes were so easily granted," Grace began, but at the look in Mollie's eyes thought

better of it. "I meant," she corrected herself blandly, "that, of course, you can never be anything but beautiful, Mollie."

"Well, I don't know, of course," said Mollie, with the same vengeful light in her eyes, "but I'm always suspicious of any one who goes to extremes."

"Never mind your suspicions, Mollie," cried Betty, with a happy ring in her voice, as the last of the quartette climbed in under the covers. "All that really interests me now is the fact that I have a couple of letters that are just begging to be read."

"Yes, and I'd like to know if that's fair," said Grace, looking injured. "We only got one apiece, while here you are rolling in luxury——"

"And they're both in the same handwriting—Allen's of course," added Amy, peeping over Betty's shoulder. "Why does he write you two letters that he knows will both reach you in the same mail, Betty?"

"Just to be original, I suppose," answered Betty, striving to speak calmly while a hot flush mounted to her forehead. "Anyway," she added lightly, "I suppose the best way to satisfy our curiosity would be to read our letters and find out."

"Oh, I forgot," cried Grace, pushing back the

covers and slipping out of bed. "There's just one thing better than reading letters."

"Now what are you after?" cried Mollie despairingly. "Well," she added, tearing open her letter decidedly, "there's one thing certain,—I'm not going to wait another minute!"

"Well, nobody asked you to," retorted Grace, slipping back into bed with the precious candy box under her arm. "And, what's more," she added threateningly, "if you're going to be uncivil, I won't ask you to share my candies."

"Goodness! now isn't that the limit?" cried Betty suddenly, and they looked at her in surprise. She, in her turn, having thought aloud, flushed and turned back to the letter. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I really didn't mean to interrupt you."

"No you don't, Betty Nelson!" cried Mollie, slipping a hand over Allen's letter and forcing Betty to meet her eyes. "We won't any of us read another word till you tell us what you were going to say."

"Well, you don't need to," Betty was beginning when she met Mollie's eyes and laughed resignedly.

"Oh, all right," she capitulated. "I was simply going to say that the nosy old censor crossed out a whole line just at the most interesting part."

"What was it?" coaxed Amy teasingly. "Come, Betty dear, tell us what he said."

"Goodness!" cried Betty crossly, getting redder every moment, and knowing it, "didn't I tell you the censor crossed it out?"

"You know very well that wasn't what we meant," cried Mollie, with a frightful frown. "Amy was referring to the sentiments on both sides of the censored part."

"Oh well, you could hardly expect," Betty was beginning, when Amy, who had been peeping over her shoulder clapped a hand to her mouth too late to check a sudden exclamation.

"Oh girls!" she cried gleefully. "What I saw! What I saw!"

"Amy Blackford," Betty's eyes were black with real anger now, "I don't know how you could do such a thing. I didn't think it of you!"

Not only Amy, but the other girls were frightened by this sudden change in their usually good-natured Little Captain, and Amy hastened to make amends.

"I'm sorry, Betty dear," she said, flushing with real shame beneath Betty's accusing eyes. "I didn't mean it—truly I didn't. And I'll never do it again, never!"

"Oh, all right," replied Betty, controlling herself with an effort and turning back to the letter.

"I'm sorry I said anything, Amy, if you didn't mean it."

There was a little constrained silence after that, no one knowing just how to clear the rather electric atmosphere. They went on reading absorbedly, only the crackling of the paper as they turned a page breaking the deep stillness of the room.

It was Betty who finally relieved the tension.

"If that doesn't sound just like Roy," she said, and they looked up expectantly, relieved at the naturalness of her tone. "Allen says that he—Roy, that is—was very much impressed with his first sight of a camouflaged ship. Said he had devised a fine scheme of killing off the German army in a hurry. He'd disguise himself as a piece of Limburger cheese, and when the Huns came running to him, he'd simply give them a gentle little tap on the head."

"Humph," snorted Mollie contemptuously, "how long do you suppose he'd be able to keep that up?"

"He says they'd never suspect the truth," Betty chuckled. "They'd simply think it was a particularly husky piece of cheese!"

CHAPTER XXIII

'HE MIRACLE

It was only a few days later that the wonderful, the incredible thing happened!

The girls were returning from a rather hurried excursion to a near-by town when they came face to face with the motorcyclist. His motor had evidently stalled, and he was standing in the middle of the road tinkering with it.

Paralyzed by the suddenness of the thing, the girls just stood still and stared until the man, evidently feeling their eyes upon him, turned slowly about and faced them.

He seemed to recognize them immediately, for his first look of bewilderment was followed quickly by one of fear, and with an abrupt motion he turned back to his machine.

"Now we have him, what are we going to do with him?" whispered Mollie, a comical look of chagrin on her face. "We can't capture him all by ourselves, and we can hardly expect him to wait while we get some one."

"He is huskier than I thought," admitted Grace, adding suddenly, "Betty, what are you going to do?"

But Betty either did not hear or did not want to, for she was approaching the man without a backward glance in their direction. Though not knowing just what was about to happen, the girls followed loyally, close at her heels.

As for Betty, she simply stepped up close to the man and stood looking at him steadily, finally forcing him by sheer concentration to straighten up and meet her eyes.

"Well, who are you?" he demanded at last, gruffly.

"That was just the question I was about to put to you," Betty replied, and by her outward composure no one could possibly have guessed how hard her heart was beating. "We are really quite desirous of knowing all about you."

"May I ask," he said, his cruel mouth sneering under the absurd moustache, "what has happened to arouse this sudden interest?"

The sneer brought a flush to Betty's face and made her eyes glow angrily.

"You ought to know that without my telling you," she said coldly. "Perhaps you will remember, if I recall it to you, the day you knocked an old woman down in the middle of the road and

then rode away without finding out how seriously you had injured her."

"I really don't know what you're talking about," the man replied, with an attempt to appear frank, which made his face more sinister than before. "You must have mistaken me for some one else."

"That's impossible." Mollie's voice was crisp and clear cut, and the man glanced with surprise and a shadow of alarm at this new assailant.

Then suddenly his manner of cool insolence changed, and he shot them a look that remained quiveringly in their memories long after the man himself had passed forever out of their lives.

"Whoever you are, you're fools," he said gruffly, menacingly. "And if you don't forget all about this thing you've been spouting about, I'll make it pretty darned unpleasant for you. Get me?" And, with a quick movement, he started his motor and leaped on his machine.

Betty sprang forward and desperately clutched the handle bars, calling on the girls for assistance, but he roughly pushed her aside. At the same moment the machine leapt forward and Betty knew that he would get away again.

Then it was the first miracle happened. Sergeant Mullins, out on a hike with some of the rookies from the camp, the sound of his approach

deadened by the putting of the machine, appeared around the turn in the road, coming toward them. To keep from running into the men, which would have meant a nasty spill, the motorcyclist was forced to put on his brake.

The men would have gathered to one side of the road to let him pass, but Betty's shrill cry arrested them.

"Don't let him pass," she implored them desperately. "It's our criminal, Sergeant Mullins! Don't you see? The gambler!"

But Sergeant Mullins, in one swift glance, had already taken in the situation, and as the man tried to start his machine he sprang forward and grasped the handle bars, at the same time shouting orders to his men.

"Surround him, fellows!" he cried. "This man is under arrest!"

"What do you mean?" cried the gambler, his eyes glaring with the rage of a cornered animal.

"Don't waste your breath, Denham," retorted Sergeant Mullins coolly, "your reputation isn't any too good around these parts, you know, and you'll have plenty of chance to do your shouting to the judge.

"Never mind your machine," he added sharply, as the fellow's mean eyes glanced about desperately for means of escape. "The boys will take

care of that. And," he added meaningly, "I have rather a life-sized impression that you won't be needing it again for some time to come!"

Denham shot him a vicious glance, and got off sullenly from his machine while a group of soldiers stepped up smartly to take charge of it.

With his prisoner safely guarded, Sergeant Mullins ordered the march back to camp, then drew in a long breath and looked at the girls.

"Well," he said, with his slow smile, "you did it that time."

"We!" cried Betty, her cheeks flushed with excitement and the exhilaration of success. "I should say you did the work while we looked on. Oh, I'm so happy—and so grateful to you."

"But I didn't do anything," he protested, smiling whimsically, as they turned to follow the soldiers and their prisoner. "I simply let the boys do the work while I looked on."

"Goodness! what do we care how it happened as long as it did?" cried Mollie happily. "Maybe now he'll see that he can't run down old ladies promiscuously and get away with it."

"Not with girls like you on his trail," said the sergeant admiringly.

"But what are you going to do with him, now you've got him?" asked Grace, repeating almost word for word the question Mollie had put only

a few minutes before. "I suppose we've got to get out some sort of definite charge against him."

"Yes," said the sergeant thoughtfully. "We can put him in the guardhouse up at camp till we have a chance to get the township authorities up here. And," he added, turning to Betty, "I'd like to have an interview with that old lady of yours, if you can manage it. We'll have to have her evidence, you know."

"Oh, and isn't it lucky?" cried Betty, executing a little skip in her excitement. "She told us only this morning that she was feeling perfectly well again and would go away to-morrow. We were worrying ourselves sick about it, but couldn't think up a single plan to keep her with us. And if she had gone before this happened——" she stopped, overwhelmed by the mere contemplation of the tragedy.

"I still feel as if I were dreaming," said Amy, as they entered the camp gate. "It all happened so suddenly, and just when we were feeling so awfully blue."

"Well, I know I wasn't dreaming," said Grace plaintively, "because in my excitement I dropped two perfectly good candies in the road and forgot to pick 'em up."

They laughed at her, and Betty added whimsically:

"Perhaps it was just as well for your digestion that you did. I suppose you'll have to go to the guardhouse to explain about the prisoner," she rather stated than asked, turning to Sergeant Mullins.

"Yes," he said, adding, with a trace of hesitation: "It won't take long though, and if you don't mind waiting till I get back I'd like to have that talk with the old lady he knocked down. It's necessary to see her as soon as possible."

"Goodness, we don't mind waiting," cried Betty. "And you can't see her too quickly to suit us. We're just crazy to see the whole thing settled——"

"And that brute behind the bars," finished Mollie vindictively.

Sergeant Mullins laughed boyishly, saluted smartly, and turned on his heel to follow the boys who were fast bearing the prisoner to the guardhouse and from there to the just punishment that had been so long in overtaking him.

"Well," said Mollie, as she flopped down on the steps and favored the girls with a beaming smile, "now what have you got to say for yourselves?"

"More in truth than in modesty," twinkled the Little Captain, "I should say that we are pretty good."

"My! don't we love us?" queried Grace, fishing up from her pocket a much-mangled and sadly worn chocolate and calmly inserting it between two very pretty rows of white teeth. "It's really touching——"

"Oh, Grace, how can you think of candies at a time like this?" cried Mollie impatiently.

"Don't know," returned Grace, calmly nibbling. "It's a gift, I guess."

"Gracie, you're an awful goose," cried Betty, hugging her impulsively. "But I'm so happy, I'll forgive you even that——"

"It's you that ought to be forgiven for calling me names," returned Grace, in an injured tone of voice. "Goodness," she cried, a moment later, pointing a moist and tired chocolate in the direction of the horizon. "Am I mistaken, or is that the stalwart figure of our sergeant approaching in the distance?"

"Oh, it is, it is!" cried Betty, springing to her feet and fairly dancing in her excitement and impatience. "Oh, I can't wait! Why doesn't he hurry?"

As a matter of fact, the sergeant was hurrying very much indeed, for he was almost as eager as the girls to see the old lady and collect the evidence in the case against the motorcyclist.

He was panting as he sprang up the steps to-

ward them and his eyes were bright with anticipation.

"I got back as soon as I could," he cried. "Now, if you can take me——"

The girls wasted no time in words, and led him swiftly up the stairs, pausing before Mrs. Sanderson's door.

"What shall we do if she's gone?" whispered Betty, a sudden panic seizing her. Then, without further delay, rapped smartly on the door.

At the answering "come in" they tumbled into the room, followed by Sergeant Mullins. Then it was the second miracle happened!

Mrs. Sanderson started, stared, then rose tremblingly to her feet.

"My Willie boy!" she cried, groping toward him, dazed, unbelieving, incredulous. "It's my boy, my little son—my—baby——"

Then Sergeant Mullins, with a hoarse cry, rushed across the room and gathered the little figure in his arms—strong, man's arms that crushed and hurt.

"Mother!" he cried. "Oh, my mother!"

CHAPTER XXIV

MYSTERY EXPLAINED

THE girls stared for a moment, dazed, bewildered. Stared at the dark head bent in such passionate tenderness over the gray one, stared at the old hands patting the broad young shoulders, tremblingly, joyfully, incredulously, then, with a stifled gasp, turned and fled.

Betty closed the door softly and followed the girls into their own room where they sank down on arms of chairs or tables or the edge of the bed —any place—and went on staring, only this time at each other.

"Betty Nelson," Mollie broke out at last, her eyes dark and wide, her voice awed, "did you ever in your life hear of such a thing?"

"Of course I never did," answered Betty, her lips trembling, her eyes shining and wet. "Not since my fairy-story days, anyway," she added softly.

"But how," Grace demanded, still too dazed to

think clearly, "can Mrs. Sanderson's son be William Mullins?"

"Goodness! how do we know?" returned Mollie, wiping two tears from the end of her nose. "It's all the biggest kind of a m-mystery, anyway. Oh, dear, has anybody got a handkerchief?" as two other tears threatened to make their appearance. "I didn't know I had it in me to be such a goose."

"We seldom do realize our possibilities," drawled Grace, but Mollie was too busy wiping away the traces of her weakness to notice the insult.

"And to think," Amy murmured softly, "that if that old motorcyclist hadn't knocked Mrs. Sanderson down, she would have gone away without finding her son, and the chances are she would never have seen him again."

"I suppose you think we ought to send the motorcyclist a vote of thanks," remarked Mollie dryly, recovering herself a little. "If he keeps on knocking old ladies down in the middle of the road and then gets himself arrested, he may be counted on to do a lot of good in the world."

"I don't see how you can say such silly things," Amy began hotly, when Betty broke in pleadingly:

"Please, please, girls!" she said, smiling as only

Betty knew how to smile. "What is the use of quarreling about miracles? The most wonderful thing in all the world has happened, and what do we care how it happened? Just think of it!" she added, leaning forward eagerly. "Only this morning we were feeling discouraged and downhearted because Mrs. Sanderson was going away to-morrow and we couldn't think of a thing to do to help her. Then all in one day, in an hour, really, we capture the motorcyclist and find her son for her. It's no wonder I can't seem to make myself believe I haven't dreamed it all," she finished, with such a look of utter happiness on her face that Mollie slipped an arm about her and hugged her fondly.

"You know, Betty," she said solemnly, "I'm almost beginning to have a superstitious belief in you."

"Goodness! Why?" cried Betty, while the other two looked at Mollie wonderingly. "What have I done now that you should say such things and treat me thus?"

"Why, I was just thinking," Mollie replied with rare earnestness, "that, as usual, if it hadn't been for you we probably wouldn't have arrested the gambler—or rather, given Sergeant Mullins a chance to—and so wouldn't have brought him here to find out he belonged to our little old lady."

"But I don't see how——" Betty was beginning in real bewilderment when Mollie interrupted her impatiently.

"I don't suppose you do," she said, with fond severity. "You never do give yourself credit for anything, anyway, Betty Nelson. But who was it, I'd like to know, that first had courage to go up and speak to that criminal?"

"Oh, that!" said Betty, sinking back relievedly. "Anybody could have done that."

"Perhaps anybody could," retorted Mollie practically. "But you notice nobody else did, don't you, Betty Nelson?"

"Well, I know, but that didn't have anything to do with capturing him," argued Betty, determined not to take any more than her share of the credit—and not that, if she could help it. "If Sergeant Mullins hadn't happened along just at that moment, he'd have gotten away from us the way he did those other times."

"Yes, but who delayed him, I'd like to know," Mollie flung back triumphantly, "and gave the Sergeant time to come along and finish up the work?"

"All right," laughed Betty. "I'll admit that much, since you insist. But what earthly difference does it make, anyway, as long as it's done?" she cried. "Just think," her voice trembled a lit-

tle, "how happy those two must be in there! I—I—oh, I can't believe it yet."

"Well, but that's still troubling me," said Grace, so apropos of nothing at all that they just stared at her.

"Goodness, don't look at me like that," she cried irritably, getting up and walking round the room. "You know I always did hate mysteries."

"We should be very much obliged," said Mollie, with forced politeness, "if you would tell us what you're raving about."

"Goodness, don't you even see there is a mystery?" she cried, facing them impatiently. "How in the world could Sergeant Mullins ever be Mrs. Sanderson's son?"

"You'd better ask 'em," chuckled Mollie. "They both seemed so tolerably sure of it that we've taken it for granted. What's the deep, dark mystery?"

"Grace means," it was Amy who acted the peacemaker this time, "that it's strange about the name."

"And, of course, it is," Betty added gravely. "Sergeant Mullins should by all rights be Sergeant Sanderson."

"And Mrs. Sanderson couldn't have known about his being called Mullins," Grace broke in eagerly, "because we've spoken to her of Ser-

geant Mullins more than once, and she never acted as though more than casually interested."

"Well, but I suppose that's easily enough explained," said Mollie, who was in no mood for details—the actual occurrences being wonderful enough in themselves to occupy her attention for some time to come. "People often enough change their last names for some reason or other."

"Then you mean," said Grace, "that William Mullins is really William Sanderson?"

"A fair assumption," returned Mollie dryly. "Unless Mrs. Sanderson's name is Mullins."

"Perhaps the best way," suggested Betty peaceably, "would be to wait and let Mrs. Sanderson tell us about it."

"Wait——" Grace was beginning, when a gentle tap sounded on the door and Betty flew to open it.

On the threshold stood Mrs. Sanderson, her eyes red with weeping, yet her whole face so transformed with joy that the girls would hardly have recognized her as the Mrs. Sanderson of that morning. Instinctively they glanced over her shoulder, expecting to see the tall figure of Sergeant Mullins looming in the background, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"He's—he's gone," said the little old lady tremulously, seeming to interpret their glances, at the

same time coming timidly into the room. "He told me to tell you," her face lighted up still more with that wonderful inward joy, "that he would have stayed and thanked you young ladies, but he'd made sort of an idiot of himself—so he said —an' would be around later, instead."

"And is he really—really—*really* your son?" cried Betty, unable to contain herself longer, pressing the old lady into a chair and kneeling down before her eagerly. "Oh, we knew you'd come and tell us! We've been so very happy for you."

"Yes, he's my Willie boy," answered the little old lady, speaking dreamily as though even yet she was not able to grasp the wonderful thing that had happened to her. "It's strange when I come to think of it how I knew him right away because, you see, I've always sort o' thought of him as my little son, my baby, and in my mind I've always seen him as he was that day he ran away. But he's really just the same—my little Willie boy—only taller and sort o' broader in the shoulders an' handsomer——" her voice broke and Betty slipped a sympathetic little hand in hers while the girls gathered closer.

"You see, I've been prayin' for this thing for a good many years," she went on quaintly, "an' it looks like Providence sort o' saw fit to answer me

at last. An' He jest picked out the sweetes' little ladies He could find to be His instruments."

The girls laughed unsteadily and Betty's young hand tightened on the old one.

"We feel as if it all must be a fairy story," she said softly.

"That's jest what it is—a fairy story," cried the little old lady, turning those wonder-filled eyes upon them.

"It must have seemed sort o' strange to you about the name," she added, after a short pause.

Betty saw that Grace was about to interrupt, but a warning glance stopped her.

"You see, his real name is William Mullins Sanderson. But when he ran away he dropped the Sanderson so's they couldn't arrest him for somethin' he didn't do—poor little lad." Her voice was very soft and her eyes tender. "He would have come back to me, only he heard that I was dead and thought 'twasn't any use. He said he'd jest been eatin' his heart out, thinkin' of old days an' how he'd promised to make a fortune for us both an' buy a big house where I wouldn't ever have to work again 'less I wanted to. An' now he says," she straightened up and her eyes flashed with pride in him, "he says, soon's the war is over he's goin' to make that old dream come true.

"He'd been studyin' to be a lawyer, an' had jest passed his 'bar exams'—so he called 'em—when the war broke out, an' he jes' couldn't resist the call o' the bugle. O' course he couldn't!" Once more was heard that thrill of pride. "Wasn't he my Willie boy, who had the blood of fightin' ancestors in his veins as well as brains an' a love o' book larnin' from his pa?

"But he says when the war's over he's goin' back to his books an' make good, an'," with simple assurance; "I know he will. Jest think," she added dreamily, "my little son, a lawyer!

"But I ain't never goin' to forget," she cried, flinging her head up with a martial gesture, "that first of all, he was a soldier!"

CHAPTER XXV

TO "CARRY ON"

"I COULD be completely happy," sighed Betty, "if it weren't for just one thing."

It was more than a week after the wonderful discovery in their Sergeant Mullins as Mrs. Sanderson's long lost son, and until this afternoon the girls had hardly been able to find a minute to get together and discuss the remarkable affair.

But to-day they had secured very reliable substitutes to fill their places for a few hours and the Outdoor Girls had decided to make the most of this rare holiday.

Mollie had suggested a spin in the machine, and the girls had eagerly assented, anxious to blow the cobwebs of hard work and confinement from their brains and get out on the open road where they could think clearly and freely.

Exhilarated by the rushing air and the sunshine, Mollie put on extra speed, then gazed sidewise and wickedly at Amy.

"'Oh, Mollie, do be careful,'" she mimicked.

" 'I don't care about dying, but I'd rather choose a neater death!' "

But for once Amy refused to bite. She simply smiled calmly and helped herself to another of Grace's fast disappearing chocolates.

"Go as far as you like, dear," was her surprising comment. "I feel rather wild and woolly myself to-day. Nothing you could do would bother me."

The girls looked surprised—Mollie anxious.

"Goodness," she said disconsolately, "that takes away half the fun. What's the use of teasing you when you won't tease?"

"Does seem rather a waste of time," remarked Amy, and they gaped anew.

"Goodness, what has come over the child?" asked Grace of Betty, adding with sudden suspicion, "She must have had a letter."

"Did you?" they cried all at once, fixing accusing eyes upon her.

"You must be joking," Amy answered plaintively. "I haven't had a letter for so long I don't know what it would look like."

"It is just about time we heard from the boys again," said Betty thoughtfully. "Has anybody been to the post-office to-day?"

It seemed nobody had, for everybody had been too busy; so Mollie made an abrupt turn, almost

sending the car into a ditch, and headed back for town.

"Now what are you doing?" queried Amy plaintively.

"Going to remedy an awful mistake," Mollie replied shortly. "I couldn't enjoy my holiday if I thought there might be letters waiting for us."

Amy and Grace protested.

But they were not disappointed. There were not only letters from the boys, but several fat and interesting epistles from friends and relatives in Deepdale, including two from Paul and Dodo, Mollie's small and mischievous brother and sister.

"Let's drive away out of town where we can be by ourselves," Betty suggested, face radiant, fingers fairly aching to tear the precious missives from their envelopes. "Then we can stop the car and Mollie can read hers, too."

"You always have the right idea, Betty honey," said Mollie, with fond emphasis, as she swung the car at breakneck speed down the street and headed for the open country. "Now aren't you glad," she flung at Grace and Amy, "that we made you go back with us and take a chance?"

"Don't rub it in, Mollie dear," purred Grace, too happy at the prospect before them to contradict anything or anybody on earth. "We are deeply appreciative and inordinately grateful to

you for your wonderful foresight and insistence."

"Is she calling me names?" cried Mollie threateningly. "For if she is, I should like to remark for the benefit of each and every one that I am still in possession of the wheel, and a swift and terrible doom shall overtake——"

"Rave on, rave on, Macbeth," chuckled Betty, adding with a whimsical smile and a quickened heart beat as she fingered the letter she had so carefully placed under the rest: "There's no use, Mollie dear—you can't start a rumpus now. It can't be done. We're all too good-natured."

"That's the way Frank talks after a particularly good meal," chuckled Mollie.

"And I never saw boys who were so absolutely crazy about hot biscuits," sighed Amy. "If you gave them enough hot biscuits, they didn't seem to know or care whether they had anything else or not."

"Yes, somebody was always stirring up biscuit dough when we were at Pine Island," agreed Grace, her eyes dreamy. "I think one of us should have invented a patent stirrer—just in self-defense!"

"Just the same, I'd wager anything," cried Betty, with a thrill in her voice and the hint of tears behind the brightness of her eyes, "that there isn't one of us who wouldn't be willing to

make biscuits from morning till night if we only had the boys here to eat them."

"Oh, wouldn't we!" cried Amy hungrily. "I shouldn't care if I turned into a biscuit!"

They laughed at that, but the laugh was not scornful, for their hearts were very full and tender.

"Sha'n't we stop here?" Mollie asked, after they had ridden a long, long way in silence. "It's private enough——"

"Oh, yes, yes," the others interrupted her eagerly, and as Mollie guided the car over to the side of the road, Betty sprang the news she had been bursting to tell ever since they started.

"Girls," she cried, and quickly they turned to her, sensing something unusual in her tone, "I have a surprise for you."

"Yes?" they cried eagerly.

"It's about our Sergeant William Mullins Sanderson," she announced, her eyes sparkling.

"Yes?" they cried again, and Mollie added impatiently:

"Oh, Betty, don't keep us waiting. What about him?"

"Only," said Betty, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "that he's got the thing he wanted most in the world—besides his mother. This morning he received his overseas orders."

"Oh, Betty!" cried Mollie, her eyes big and round. "Isn't he simply wild about it?"

"He's delirious," said Betty simply, adding, with the ring of pride in her voice: "He seemed two inches taller when he told me about it. Oh, the spirit of our boys—the wonderful spirit of them! It can't take them long, it can't, when they once get started!"

"But Mrs. Sanderson," put in Amy gently. "How is she taking it?"

"I haven't seen her yet," said Betty, her face sobering a little. But it brightened again as she added with conviction: "I think we know enough about that little lady to be sure she'll take it standing up and be prouder than ever of her 'Willie boy.'"

"Of course she will," said Grace softly, her eyes following the red disc of the sun as it sank slowly in the west. "We're all awfully proud of them, but I don't think any of us can help wishing that it were all over instead of just beginning, and that the boys were coming home to us victorious."

"We shouldn't be human if we didn't feel that way," said Betty soberly. "But we haven't come to the joyful part, yet. Just now we've got to keep cheerful and hold on hard to our hope and faith in the future. We owe that to the boys, the

boys who are fighting, perhaps dying for us, more than we owe it to ourselves.

"But now," she added, forcing a lighter tone, "we've got a big treat before us and we're not going to think of anything but just that. Our letters, girls—we've been forgetting them."

The girls started, looked surprised, then instantly responded to the challenge of her lighter tone.

"Goodness, it's you who made us forget them, Betty Nelson," cried Grace, squeezing the Little Captain's hand fondly, then falling to with a will on her own momentarily neglected mail. "Just see," she added wickedly, holding up two letters with the coveted foreign postmark before their envious eyes, "what an advantage it is to have a brother in the army as well as a—a——"

"Well, go ahead," Betty teased, while the others laughed delightedly at her flaming color. "What is that other thing you've got besides a brother, the mere mention of whose name makes you the color of a beet?—I should say," correcting herself with a demure little smile, "the color of a flaming sunset———"

"That would be more poetic," agreed Mollie soberly, while her eyes danced. "But either description would be correct."

"You geese," cried Grace, trying vainly to hide

her flushed face behind the letter she had opened. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"She remindeth me of the graceful ostrich," chanted Mollie cruelly, "who hideth his head and thinks thereby——"

"Now I know you're calling me names," cried Grace, raising the flushed face and glaring threateningly at the back of the mischievous Mollie.

"Well, she at least said you were graceful," chuckled Betty, tearing open a letter from Deepdale and still reserving the best till the last. "Anyway," she added, "we have better things to do than to engage in useless controversy."

"I don't know what it's all about," said Mollie, settling herself luxuriously to enjoy her own small pile of letters. "But I'll take your word for it, Betty, just the same."

And while they read the dusk came down upon them softly like a mantle, and the setting sun sent ruddy rays to touch their young, bowed heads.

The last paragraph of Allen's letter Betty read and reread, finally through a mist of tears that blurred the words and ran them in together.

"It won't be long," he wrote, "before we fellows will receive the orders that we've all been crazy for—the orders that will take us to the front. And then, Betty, there's not a Hun that

can stand before me. For I've a memory, little girl, that will make me carry on to victory—and you. Will you be waiting for me, Betty, when it's over? Will you want me then? For I'm coming to you, little girl. As surely as the sun rises every morning and sets again at night, I'm coming to you. Betty, dear, I'm loving you——"

And Betty, raising a transfigured, tremulous face, gazed straight into the heart of the setting sun.

"Yes, I'll be waiting," she whispered to herself. "Oh, Allen, come back to me—come back to me—soon——"

And so, in the midst of stirring scenes, with martial music always ringing in their ears, with pride in the past and courage in the future, we once more wave farewell to our Outdoor Girls.